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MARCH 25, 2024

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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

PERSONS OF INTEREST

E. Tammy Kim profiles Michelle Wu, the mayor of Boston, whose housing agenda may transform the city.

THE FRONT ROW

Richard Brody makes his list of the thirty-three greatest bio-pics in cinematic history.

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THE MAIL

DOOMSDAY PREP

Kathryn Schulz beautifully explains the risks posed by solar flares and other space weather ("Starburst," March 4th). In doing so, she cites FEMA's finding that "only two natural hazards have the capacity to simultaneously affect the entire nation. One is a pandemic. The other is a severe solar storm." Alas, there is a third: an impact by an asteroid or a comet.

In the past thirty years, we have witnessed Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 striking Jupiter to massive effect, Comet Siding Spring narrowly missing Mars, and an asteroid exploding over the Russian city of Chelyabinsk with the energy of nearly thirty Hiroshima bombs. And yet, although various significant steps have been taken, we have hit the Snooze button when it comes to enacting a comprehensive defense plan against such a threat. Currently, we have very little infrastructure for deflecting an incoming impactor. Nor are our means to assure the detection of one fully adequate; the Near-Earth Object Surveyor infrared space telescope, which was designed to help discover the estimated twenty-five thousand objects large enough to inflict regional damage or worse should they hit Earth, has faced budgetary delays and even the risk of cancellation. Would another wake-up call seal the deal? We can only hope that, like the 1989 space-weather event in Quebec that Schulz describes, the next warning shot from space will be "large enough to teach a lesson without being large enough to cause a catastrophe."
Joel Marks
Milford, Conn.

Schulz provides a graphic description of what might occur were a big solar storm to affect power grids and communications systems. Another major concern that could have been mentioned is the potential destruction of electronic circuits that include unshielded microchips. In 1982, Amory B. Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins published a book, "Brittle Power: Energy Strategy for National Security," which describes the impact of an electromagnetic pulse; the authors contend that a single nuclear device detonated above the center of the U.S. could cause every unprotected electronic circuit in the country to fail. The way to preserve today's advanced societies is to begin the huge, urgent task of isolating, shielding, and surge-protecting all critical electronic devices.
C. Warren Axelrod
Great Neck, N.Y.

TRIBAL MEMBERSHIP

Jay Caspian Kang's article about Elizabeth Hoover did a good job of looking at why a person might claim Native American heritage ("Identity Crisis," March 4th). As Kang writes, "Native identity is a legal and political classification, based on filial lineage and tribal citizenship." There's a reason for that. When the federal government enacted the Dawes Act, in 1887, thereby giving interests in tribal lands to individual tribal members, so great was the demand by non-members for land that the government also established a provision to weed out those not qualified (i.e., non-Indians). The criteria for membership in a tribe have long been recognized by the Supreme Court. Generally, an enrollee must have a blood quantum in that tribe, though, as Kang notes, the amount varies—from more than half for Northern Ute to simple descent for the Five Tribes of eastern Oklahoma, who include the Choctaw, of which I am a member.

Indian heritage is not the same thing as membership in a tribe. If universities wish to have Native American-studies programs, they should consider employing tribal members to head them. Doing so would give greater credibility to the programs and prevent them from blurring claims of heritage with present-day tribal associations.
Michael Stancampiano
Oklahoma City, Okla.

•

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GOINGS ON

MARCH 20 – 26, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

Since the dissolution of Sonic Youth, in 2011, its co-founder, the alt-rock luminary **Kim Gordon,** has remained busy, expressive, and patently cool—holding exhibitions of her paintings, writing a memoir, making an album with a pro surfer, and appearing in a Gus Van Sant film. She didn't find time (or reason) to release her solo début, "No Home Record," until 2019, and that was cool, too, as a sort of blaring, blasé late-career relaunch. Her second solo album, "The Collective," released this month and inspired by the Jennifer Egan novel "The Candy House," only furthers her legend, with industrial trap-rock that sets Gordon's decades of noise experience in modern contexts. The new album's daring beats and improvised guitar are marks of a lifelong radical still at the peak of her powers.—*Sheldon Pearce (Knockdown Center; March 25.)*

ABOUT TOWN

PODCASTS | Assuming the Presidency after the downfall of the disgraced Richard Nixon, in 1974, Gerald Ford struck a note of definitive reassurance: "My fellow-Americans, our long national nightmare is over." But the new limited podcast series **"Landslide,"** with sound-rich storytelling and terrific archival audio, reveals how Ford's Presidency ushered in the beginning of a longer national nightmare. The former NPR "Marketplace" reporter Ben Bradford focusses on an underappreciated but pivotal moment—the Republican Presidential primaries of 1976, when the mesmerizing G.O.P. firebrand Ronald Reagan took advantage of the nation's disarray to challenge Ford's nomination. Falsehoods, charisma, manipulative zeal, paranoia about communism and élites—it's all here, disrupting one race and setting the stage for many to come.—*Sarah Larson*

CLASSICAL | With its rollicking plot and Brobdingnagian orchestration, Schoenberg's **"Gurrelieder"** is a grand opera shorn of a staging. In many ways, that's a relief: the story and music owe obvious debts to Wagner, but, where the former, drawn from Danish legend, verges on the silly, the latter can be sublime. Schoenberg would later become known for abstrusely academic music written using a twelve-tone system that he helped develop; in this early work, a richly chromatic late-Romantic tonality illustrates the story of King Waldemar (sung by Dominic Armstrong) and his beloved Tove (Felicia Moore). Leon Botstein conducts the American Symphony Orchestra, a bevy of soloists, and a hefty chorus, for a total of more than two hundred performers.—*Fergus McIntosh (Carnegie Hall; March 22.)*

DANCE | Pop songs as sophisticated as those of Burt Bacharach deserve equally sophisticated choreography. In "The Look of Love," at BAM, the **Mark Morris Dance Group** applies its unaffected musicality to "Walk on By," "I Say a Little Prayer," and a dozen other Bacharach gems, played live in slightly salted arrangements by Ethan Iverson and featuring a worthy Dionne Warwick substitute in Marcy Harriell. Morris treats the lyrics of Hal David as he would the text of Baroque opera, having his dancers act out the words and combine those gestures into dance phrases, which capture these hits' buoyancy and blue moods alike.—*Brian Seibert (Howard Gilman Opera House; March 20-23.)*

AFRO-POP | Few musicians operating in the rapidly shifting Afro-pop landscape are as omnivorous as **Amaarae.** The Ghanaian American singer, raised between Atlanta, New Jersey, and Accra, has a unique grasp of many cultures, allowing for a music of osmosis that's fluid enough to blend punk and baile funk and everything in between. Amaarae's songs pull from many sources but are held together by the flexibility of her mewing voice, which she deploys in charged, often erotic vignettes that toy with the swing and swagger of rap. Last summer, her second album, "Fountain Baby," packed with visions of pop grandeur, established her as one of the most imaginative artists on the mainstream's margins. Amaarae seems to realize the radiant Top 40 utopia of a radical alternate reality.—*Sheldon Pearce (Warsaw; March 20.)*

THE THEATRE | After débuting in New York in 2016, Lucy Prebble's psychological drama **"The Effect,"** from 2012, is back, now in a Brit-brutalist Jamie Lloyd production, with a light-up catwalk piercing a void full of heavy, throbbing electronic sounds. This night-club-at-the-Death Star vibe undermines Prebble's half-clever, half-clumsy play about two young people (Taylor Russell and Paapa Essiedu) falling in love during an antidepressant's clinical trial: the show requires more deftness of touch to make us ignore its unconvincing science in favor of its deeper questions. Russell's odd, blank chill argues that a relationship with her character would be doomed even with no experiments involved, whereas the endlessly delightful Essiedu keeps his performance feather-light and warm—he's conducting a little study of his own into how theatrical grace notes can almost turn noise into music.—*Helen Shaw (The Shed; through March 31.)*

MOVIES | The Mauritanian director Med Hondo, who also lived and worked in France, was a politically incisive filmmaker and an aesthetically original one, as seen in his spectacular and scathing musical satire **"West Indies: The Fugitive Slaves of Liberty,"** from 1979. The film takes place on a large, shiplike set, where—in jazzy yet earnestly substantive production numbers—the contemporary French colonial overlords of a Caribbean island urge its Black residents to move to Paris (to serve as cheap and subjugated labor), and the residents debate their choices. In a single shot, the action shifts from an airport to an African port in the past, where enslaved people are being forced onto a ship; the ugly history of the French empire, from the seventeenth century to modern times, unfolds as an eye-catching feast of pageantry and a revolutionary call to arms.—*Richard Brody (Film Forum; March 22-28.)*

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Our thanks to the Jerome L. Greene Foundation for their gift honoring André Bishop as Producing Artistic Director.

TABLES FOR TWO

Café Carmellini
250 Fifth Ave.

The other night at Andrew Carmellini's swanky new restaurant in NoMad, I was reminded of the allure of unlimited breadsticks. At Café Carmellini, where meals are chock-full of delightful flourishes, the breadsticks are one of the most irresistible: a vaseful of *grissini*, pencil-thin and two feet long, their dimensions so terrifically absurd that even the most buttoned-up diner is tempted to engage in impromptu sword fights and walrus impressions. When my companions and I had nibbled the breadsticks to nothingness, we were thrilled to realize that they'd already been replenished, via service so silken that we hadn't even noticed.

Café Carmellini is a serious, sophisticated, upscale restaurant. The exquisitely appointed dining room feels at once nautical, Old World, fantastical, and stagy, like a first-class dining room on a romance-novel zeppelin, serenely crossing the Atlantic. The elegant menu matches the room; the precise and attentive service matches the menu. But—as the frankly silly breadsticks foreshadowed—the pomp of the place never lapses into tedium. Andrew Carmellini has spent his career building restaurants (Locanda Verde, Lafayette, the Dutch) that are stylish, for sure, and sceney sometimes, but never snobby. Café Carmellini, the first restaurant to bear his name, seems like a legacy play, but for all its fanciness it's also just a good time.

The menu is not quite French, though it features French quantities of butter; it's not quite Italian, though there is something undeniably Italian about the way Carmellini uses vegetables. Café Carmellini is not interested in the prevailing idea that elegance is synonymous with subtlety. Scallops Cardoz, an homage to the late Indian American chef Floyd Cardoz, sees the delicate shellfish bathed in a richly layered masala sauce. Billi bi—a luxuriously creamy mussel soup that's long overdue for a comeback—is reimagined as a sauce for a satiny hunk of poached halibut. There's a lot of foam on the menu, perhaps put to best use in the spectacularly delicious, goofily named Duck-Duck-Duck Tortellini, in which duck shows up thrice: as a *farce* to fill the pasta, as a demi-glace to dress it, and as a foie-gras foam that expertly lightens what could have been a too-too-too sort of dish.

The most fun, and most delicious, of the clever desserts is the grapefruit *sorbetto*, titled A.B.C.—the initials of Carmellini's grandmother, who, according to family lore, as confided theatrically by a service captain, greeted each day with a half grapefruit doused in vermouth. What a dame! She's honored here by a bottle of Dolin dry, produced with a flourish and poured from an arcing height over a dish of baby-pink sorbet. The flavors blend with an almost shocking profundity: sharp, bitter, citric, floral, sweet. Who doesn't love a little drama with dinner? *(Dishes $22–$78.)*

—Helen Rosner

PICK THREE

The art critic Jackson Arn shares current obsessions.

1. Purple gets a bad rap in my profession. It's supposedly the color of writing that dances around calling attention to itself when it should be doing its job—not that dancing isn't part of the job, too. I thought about this as I looked at the paintings of Archibald J. Motley, Jr., in the Met exhibit "**The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism.**" In Motley's night-life scenes, the color purple may be metallic, fleshy, menacing, or erotic, but never meek. It refuses to justify itself for your eyes—you can either give in or move along.

2. Another attention-grabbing purple can be found on the ceiling of the night club in **"Carlito's Way,"** which I recently rewatched. It's one of Brian De Palma's best movies, more soulful than I remembered but streaked with lively, visceral weirdness (Viggo Mortensen waving an adult diaper! Sean Penn with a perm!). The thin, electric-violet neon light fixture that hangs over Al Pacino in various club scenes, courtesy of the virtuoso production designer Richard Sylbert, gets the tone just right: tackily haunting, sin with a hint of the consequences.

3. You don't read a Wallace Stevens poem—you gorge on its words and images. My favorite, **"Floral Decorations for Bananas,"** ends with a lip-smacking description of banana blossoms: "Oozing cantankerous gum / Out of their purple maws, / Darting out of their purple craws / Their musky and tingling tongues." Sensuous to the point of sexiness, the lines are also surprisingly precise, and if there's a more intoxicating example of purple writing, it would give you a hangover.

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The Runaway Princesses

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
NOT SO FAR AWAY

Presidential elections rarely hinge on issues of foreign policy, yet candidates delight in them. The lure is the scale. Spot a political pattern emerging across the globe, pin its fortunes to yours (Clinton's Third Way neoliberalism, Reagan's cheerily fierce anti-Communism), and your legacy might reach far beyond Washington, your ideas imprinted in the hearts of billions. Donald Trump praised foreign autocrats so frequently (Xi Jinping is "smart, brilliant, everything perfect"; Kim Jong Un is "a tough, smart guy") that he seemed to envision them as strongman pals. John Kelly, Trump's former chief of staff, recently told CNN's Jim Sciutto that the ex-President had mused repeatedly that Adolf Hitler "did some good things" and commanded "loyalty." Kelly had to break the news that the Führer's own officers tried, on several occasions, to disloyally assassinate him.

But, this year, what happens in the rest of the world seems to matter a bit more than usual to Americans. A recent A.P.-NORC poll found that, compared with a year ago, twice as many voters—taking in the grinding war in Ukraine and the ferocious Israeli military offensive in Gaza—see foreign policy as a top national priority. Trump has been largely quiet on Israel, drawing a sharper contrast with Biden over Ukraine. He played host at Mar-a-Lago to Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian Prime Minister and Vladimir Putin ally, and told the crowd at a New Hampshire rally that he'd encourage Putin's Russia to "do whatever the hell they want" to any NATO member that, in his estimation, didn't pay a sufficient share for mutual defense. As Trump's influence has grown and Senator Mitch McConnell's has waned, the Ukraine issue has become polarized: a majority of Americans support giving further aid, but more than half of Republicans think we've given enough. At Trump's behest, House Speaker Mike Johnson is refusing to bring to the floor Senate-approved weapons funding that Kyiv badly needs. Putin has noticed the delay, saying, last week, "It would be ridiculous for us to negotiate with Ukraine just because it's running out of ammunition."

Given all this, the White House has been working assiduously to make foreign issues the accelerator pedal for its idling reëlection campaign. Biden opened his widely praised State of the Union address by linking the military defense of Ukraine against Putin to the electoral defense of American democracy against Trumpism: "What makes our moment rare is that freedom and democracy are under attack, both at home and overseas, at the very same time." The Ukraine issue has tended to show Biden at his best, since it at once demonstrates the necessity of his anti-authoritarianism and showcases his sometimes sentimental idealism. His best line in the address took aim at Trump: "You can't love your country only when you win."

But efforts to position Biden as a champion of democracy have been complicated by his support of Israel's war in Gaza, whose opponents have followed him on the campaign trail. Two days after the State of the Union, at a Georgia rally intended to build on the momentum, Biden had barely begun his remarks when a man in the audience shouted, "You're a dictator, Genocide Joe! Tens of thousands of Palestinians are dead! Children are dying!" Biden's supporters tried to drown out the protester with boos, while the President tried to keep the peace. ("Wait, wait, wait," he said, motioning for calm.) But the point had been made. It has been made elsewhere even more emphatically. Last month, in the Presidential primary in the crucial state of Michigan, thirteen per cent of Democrats—including majorities in three heavily Arab American cities—voted "uncommitted," reminding everyone that defections by voters over the issue of Gaza could tip the race toward Trump.

Biden's foreign-policy approach has been centrally about friends—about backing our allies—and, after the horrifying

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

attacks of October 7th, the President travelled to Israel, where he embraced Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and told the Israeli people, "You are not alone." The idea, Biden's advisers made clear, was to keep Netanyahu close enough to restrain him. So Biden chose to continue sending military aid to Israel, rather than condition or restrict it, and to veto a U.N. resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. The offensive in Gaza has been unstinting, killing upward of thirty thousand Palestinians, more than ten thousand of them children, and the deaths have had an effect in the U.S. According to Gallup, half of Americans think that the offensive has gone too far, and the number who view Israel favorably (though still high, at fifty-eight per cent) is at its lowest in more than two decades.

Biden himself seems to be growing more disturbed by the crisis—in particular, by Israel's threat of an imminent invasion of Rafah, the city in southern Gaza where more than a million Palestinians are sheltering. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called for an "immediate and sustained ceasefire" of at least six weeks, and Biden directed the Pentagon to begin building a floating pier in the eastern Mediterranean to try to get aid supplies to Palestinians. Caught on a hot mike after the State of the Union, Biden said he'd told Netanyahu that they would soon have a "come to Jesus" moment. Perhaps the persistence of "uncommitted" votes (eight per cent of Democrats in Washington State's primary, nineteen per cent in Minnesota's, and twenty-nine per cent in Hawaii's caucuses) is helping nudge the Party toward a new view. Last week, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on the Senate floor that Netanyahu had become an "obstacle to peace." It is time, he said, for new leadership in Israel.

The challenge for Biden in this conflict has been understood as one of balance, of not tipping too far either toward the pro-Israeli center or toward the pro-Palestinian left, and thus alienating the other. But perhaps the bigger risk, especially acute for an eighty-one-year-old President, is the perception that he is losing control of a situation overseas. During the pullout from Afghanistan—perhaps the moment when Biden's approval ratings began to tip in the wrong direction—Republicans effectively attacked him as being asleep at the wheel of a chaotic world. They are now trying the same maneuver with the southern border.

A spring of disorder looms, not only in Gaza but also in Ukraine, with concerns that Russia is positioning for a renewed offensive, and in Haiti, whose Prime Minister has announced his resignation, unable to return to a country largely controlled by gangs. In the fall, voters will have their say. Biden and the Democrats seem to be coming to the view that, by then, they will be judged not just on where their affinities lie but on how effectively they can safeguard order.

—Benjamin Wallace-Wells

THE BOARDS

SISTER ACT

To her friends, Sister Margaret McEntee, of the Sisters of Charity of New York, is Sister Peggy. In 1956, when she was a twenty-one-year-old rookie teacher at St. Anthony School, in the Bronx, she was Sister James, a name that she shed in the late sixties, after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Among her first graders was a shy kid named Johnny. "Every day, he'd raise his hand: 'May I sharpen my pencil?'" she recalled recently. "The pencil sharpener was at the end of four windows, and he watched everybody going by. Finally, I said, 'Johnny, you don't have to sharpen your pencil. You just want to see what's going on out there!'"

Decades later, in 2004, Sister Margaret found out that her former student, John Patrick Shanley, had written a play called "Doubt," in which a young nun named Sister James, who teaches in the Bronx, is torn between a charismatic priest, Father Flynn, and her rigid supervisor, Sister Aloysius, who suspects the priest of molesting a schoolboy. Sister Margaret attended a performance Off Broadway, and Shanley nervously watched her watch his rendering of her younger self. "It's magnificent," she told him. She saw the play again when it moved to Broadway, and met with Meryl Streep and Amy Adams when Shanley turned it into a film. "They would sit together with the habit on, and they'd be knitting," Sister Margaret recalled of the two actors. "I said, 'Oh, I knit,' and I used to bring my baby booties over. The three of us, we had this little knitting circle." Streep thanked her by name when she won the SAG Award.

"Doubt" is now back on Broadway, in a Roundabout revival, and Sister Margaret, a cheery, chatty eighty-eight-year-old, had once again met with the cast, including Zoe Kazan, who plays Sister James. "They always pick a good-looking young actress to play me," Sister Margaret boasted. She sat in a former novitiate, now an administrative building on the Riverdale campus of the University of Mount St. Vincent, which the Sisters of Charity founded as a women's academy, in 1847. (About sixty Sisters live in the on-site convent, and the "Doubt" film was shot at the chapel.) Sister Margaret had seen the revival two nights earlier, but some thirty Sisters were about to catch the Saturday matinée. They boarded a chartered bus, wearing cardigans and trousers and blazers. "Doubt" is set in 1964, when the Sisters still wore black robes and bonnets, but the order abandoned the habit in the late sixties, post-Vatican II, to be more accessible to the

Zoe Kazan

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community. Many had short white hair and spoke in honking New York accents. Sister Donna Dodge, the order's current president, had enjoyed the movie, but was critical of Streep's "half-assed genuflection."

In the sixties, there were more than a thousand Sisters in New York, but their number has dwindled to a hundred and forty, with a median age of eighty-five. Last spring, after two decades in which no new members had joined, the Sisters voted to take a "path of completion," meaning that they will let the order, which began in 1817, die out with them. "We prayed about it, and then we asked people to vote, and it was unanimous," Sister Donna said. Laypeople will continue to run their ministries, including a housing program and a home for foster children. The Sisters, meanwhile, will put their affairs in order while they're still spry enough—a task akin to drawing up a will. "Women have a lot more opportunities to serve in whatever way they want," Sister Donna noted. "It's just not an attractive life style, for some reason."

They arrived at the theatre and filed through metal detectors. After the show, they convened in an upstairs lounge and snacked on pretzels. The play had brought back memories of the old days. "The whole idea of 'the priest is always right,'" one Sister said. "Sisters had a place and shouldn't overstep their boundaries." Another found the bows on the actors' bonnets "a little droopy." The cast emerged from the elevators, to cheers. Kazan, who had changed into a T-shirt and ripped jeans, hugged Sister Donna and said, "I'm so moved that you guys all came." Someone asked her to sign a *Playbill*. The nuns had strong feelings about Sister Aloysius, played by Amy Ryan. "She was such a bitch!" one salty Sister told Kazan. "I felt very bad for you."

They took a group photo; Liev Schreiber, who plays Father Flynn, towered above the Sisters. "Was your cap tight on your ear?" Sister Mary Sugrue, who joined in 1955, asked Kazan.

"It itches sometimes," she confessed. They traded notes: Kazan used part of a milk jug to stiffen her bonnet; Sister Mary had used a Clorox bottle. "I keep thinking, Sister James is a nun even on her day off," Kazan said. "She's always got to wear this habit."

"It took a while for that to change," Sister Mary said. "Then they allowed us to wear white habits in the summertime, which was much better."

—*Michael Schulman*

"If you don't deal with this sort of behavior quickly, it can spread to the rest of the flock."

ARS LONGA
THE PICASSO OVER THE COUCH

Phyllis Hattis and William Rubin preferred living separately for the first twenty-four years of their twenty-six-year courtship. Hattis was an art adviser. Rubin, who died in 2006, was the director of the Museum of Modern Art's department of painting and sculpture—maybe the world's most powerful curator. She liked her independence. He liked his rental. He lived at the top of a forty-eight-story building on the Upper East Side, where he kept his personal art collection. "He was proud to tell me that he had the highest salary of any curator," Hattis said recently. "But it was still low enough to need rent control!" Eventually, in 1990, the other portion of the penthouse came up for sale. Hattis relented, and pulled some cash together to buy it. "I sold a Picasso," she said.

Their conjoined apartment—specifically the art they continued collecting in it—is the subject of a new book by Hattis, "Masterpieces: The William Rubin Collection—Dialogue of the Tribal and the Modern." The book presents the works via a tour of the apartment: Picasso above the piano, Matisse by the tool drawer, tribal masks on the windowsill. (There are also personal notes from Frank Stella and Richard Serra.) The other day, Hattis offered a real-life trip through the penthouse.

"So, we had a little disaster yesterday," Hattis said, emerging from the kitchen. She was wearing green corduroy pants, a gray sweater, and a gray scarf, and was carrying a carved mask. "We had a sculpture fall on the floor," she went on. Her Pomeranian-Siberian husky, Banksy, was lobbying for a belly scratch. "We opened the door to the balcony so he could go pee. A gust of wind blew it forward."

She walked into a living room. The square footage was ample. The carpet was a little worn. Buzzy lights, modernist furniture. "Le Corbusier, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Mies van

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der Rohe," Hattis said, pointing to couches and tables.

She stopped in front of a Picasso over a daybed, flanked by a headdress from the Baga people of Guinea and a mask from the Songye, in Congo. "These are the big guns," she said. Rubin bought the headdress from a collector, with a briefcase full of cash. "A masterpiece," Hattis said. The Picasso depicted the artist Françoise Gilot, Picasso's lover, bent over a drawing. Hattis once asked Gilot about two medallions on her apron, in the place of breasts. "She said, jokingly, 'He used to tell me that my tits were drooping after we had two children,'" Hattis said.

Rubin became friends with Picasso when he acquired his Cubist sculpture of a guitar for MOMA, in 1971. After Picasso died, Jacqueline Roque, the artist's wife, came to the opening of one of Rubin's MOMA shows. "She got to the door, and the guard said, 'I'm sorry, the museum is closed,'" Hattis recalled. "She said, 'But I'm Jacqueline Picasso.' And he said, 'And I'm Jesus Christ.'"

Rubin started his collection with some money from his father, who owned textile mills. He eventually got a loft in lower Manhattan and filled it with Abstract Expressionists. Hattis pulled out some photographs of the space. "This is Rothko," she said. "This is Motherwell. That's Frankenthaler. This is Larry Poons. He sold the Pollock to build a house in the South of France."

After Rubin moved uptown, and Hattis bought the neighboring unit, he proposed combining apartments. "I said, 'We can have an adjoining door,'" Hattis said. At one point, they almost split up. "So we closed the door," she said. "That lasted a couple of weeks or something. Then we opened the door."

She continued into another wing, opening a heavy door. The old bachelor pad. Banksy trotted with her. They turned a corner, coming to a wall-size Stella color-field mural, near a Stella relief painting. Hattis isn't particularly interested in selling. ("To be an investor collector, where the art is stored in warehouses and in free ports to avoid taxes, I'm not that," she said. "That's a shame.") But the bigger pieces, like the relief painting, required some sacrifices. "I could've put a television screen there for movies!" she said.

Onward: an Arp, a Matisse, a Warhol inspired by a Matisse. Near a desk by the balcony were two *kafigeledjo* figures from the Senufo people of West Africa. "These two guys are my buddies," she said. She calls one Max, for Max Ernst, and one Jean, for Jean Dubuffet.

There were some actual Dubuffets, too. One was in a box under the big Picasso. It used to be on the wall, but she hadn't found the right spot to rehang it. "I miss it," she said. There was open wall space right next to little Jean, if she shifted over a Matisse. "Let's just do it," she said. She produced a hammer and began whacking. "What do you think?" She stepped back to appraise, and furrowed her brow. "Let's live with it for a while," she said.

—Zach Helfand

HOSPITALITY DEPT.
FOOD AS DIPLOMACY

"Do people drink juice?" the writer Reem Kassis asked no one in particular one recent afternoon, as she bustled around her spacious kitchen in a suburb of Philadelphia. "They're not kids," she said, reasoning with herself. "They" were her dinner guests, a group of ten Swarthmore College students who were due to arrive in less than an hour. Like Kassis and her friend Sa'ed Atshan, the chair of Swarthmore's Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, the students were Palestinian. Kassis, who is thirty-six, has long hair and dark eyes, which were accentuated with eyeliner, and wore a pin-striped apron tied tightly above her waist. Moving with nervous purpose, she assembled a spread of dishes from her two cookbooks, "The Palestinian Table" and "The Arabesque Table." "In Arab culture, there's this idea that if you have guests coming over you show respect by having a big piece of meat," Kassis said. "It took me a while to get that out of my head." She had decided, instead, on platters of baked fish and shrimp, *kafta* (ground-beef patties, arranged in a whorl with fried potatoes, then ladled with tahini), and *msakhan:* roasted chicken thighs with sautéed onions, turned tart and crimson by a fistful of sumac, and topped with toasted pine nuts. This last is the dish that Kassis classifies as the most distinctly Palestinian; hers was "the Galilee version," she explained, without the usual underpinning of *taboon*—baked bread.

The students arrived in a caravan of cars, shepherded by Atshan, and piled onto couches in the living room, laughing, starting sentences in Arabic and finishing them in English. When dinner was ready, they gathered around the kitchen island, where Kassis had arranged a buffet, and introduced themselves, sharing their names and where in Palestine they or their parents had grown up: Ramallah, Bethlehem, Gaza. "I missed this so much," a young woman named Noor said happily as she filled a plate.

At the table, Noor and Kassis discovered that their parents lived on the same street in Jerusalem. Another student, named Ragad, a competitive weight lifter who wore a hijab, compared notes with Kassis on cooking in college: Kassis remembered finding cockroaches in a communal kitchen as an undergrad at the University of Pennsylvania. Ragad laughed about the boys on campus who flocked to her for food. "They're mostly Egyptian," she said. "And mostly don't know how to cook."

Growing up, in Jerusalem, Kassis had been wary of the kitchen, and of

Reem Kassis

the ways in which domesticity might trap her. The longer she lived abroad, though, the more committed she became to cooking the food of her homeland, especially as she and her husband started a family. (They now have three daughters.) She left a corporate career, which included a stint at McKinsey, to work on "The Palestinian Table," collecting recipes inherited from friends and relatives, hoping to teach people about Palestinian culture through food.

But this past fall, after Israel launched a military campaign that has since taken tens of thousands of lives in Gaza, in retaliation for the vicious attack on civilians by Hamas, Kassis wrote on Instagram that she was losing faith in the idea of food as a diplomatic tool. She described feeling "heartbroken to see how many people who have accepted our generosity, our food . . . have remained silent."

Kassis considers the notion of unfettered hospitality inherent to her identity as a Palestinian. "In my dad's village, people stand out on their balconies, and, if someone passes by, you automatically say, 'Come in!'" she said. But she had started to wonder if she was trying to prove something more: "Like, come to my house, come eat, look, we're nice! I'm not going to blow you up if you come eat at my table!" She grew animated. "My work shouldn't be about helping you realize that I'm a human being," she said. "Why is that the starting point?"

She asked a student whose mother was from Gaza if he had family there now. He did. "Uch," she said. "Sorry to dampen the mood, but are they O.K.?"

"Yeah, they are," he said. "They're trying to get out."

As the meal wound down, Atshan asked the guests to share a piece of good news. Earlier, he'd noted that the dinner was a rare reprieve from "the fraught discussions the students have to deal with in the dorms, in the classroom," which force them to "be the ambassadors." One student, he proudly announced, had been offered spots in graduate programs in Middle Eastern studies at two Ivy League universities. He took an informal poll of everyone's favorite dishes. "Reem," he cried out, "I think *msakhan* won!"

—Hannah Goldfield

SKETCHPAD BY CHRISTINE MI

ANNALS OF STYLE

BID FOR THE STARS

The booming market in the stuff of celebrity.

BY RACHEL MONROE

Julien's Auctions sells items worn by or touched by Taylor Swift and Lady Gaga.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZEN SEKIZAWA

The sidewalks of Lower Broadway in downtown Nashville are filled with people moving among neon-lit venues owned by celebrity musicians: Kid Rock's Big Ass Honky Tonk & Rock 'n' Roll Steakhouse, Jason Aldean's Kitchen & Rooftop Bar, Miranda Lambert's Casa Rosa. The Hard Rock Café, which opened in 1994, when the neighborhood could still reasonably be called eclectic, sits at the far edge of the strip, overlooking the Cumberland River. One evening last November, Julien's Auctions took over a private room at the restaurant for a three-day sale in honor of the company's twentieth anniversary. There was a spotlighted stage full of objects that musicians had worn or touched or played: a scratched amber ring that Janis Joplin wore onstage at the Monterey Pop Festival, in 1967; Prince's gold snakeskin-print suit, small enough to fit on an adolescent-size mannequin; ripped jeans that had belonged to Kurt Cobain.

In the past year, the fine-art market has cooled, owing to uncertainty about the economy, but prices for celebrity-adjacent objects keep going up. A few weeks before the Julien's event, Sotheby's had auctioned off Freddie Mercury's estate, drawing the most bidders the house had seen in two decades. "There was zero rationality to the valuations," Chase McCue, the director of memorabilia at Hard Rock International, told me. "His *mustache comb* went for almost two hundred thousand." The sale brought in more than fifteen million dollars, nearly quadruple the high estimate.

When a blue-chip auction house such as Sotheby's or Christie's handles a celebrity estate, it's often because the estate includes valuable collections of contemporary art, like David Bowie's, or jewelry, like Wallis Simpson's. From its start, in 2003, Julien's, which is based in Los Angeles, has focussed on pop-culture ephemera. In 2014, the company's co-founder Darren Julien appeared on a short-lived A&E show, "Celebrity Home Raiders," visiting the homes of third-tier stars—Debbie Gibson, David Cassidy—and appraising their possessions. On the program, Julien, then in his mid-forties, looked fresh-faced and nervous, like a J.V. football coach in his first huddle. When I met him in Nashville, he wore a designer shirt and spoke with relaxed confidence. Julien's holds the record for selling the most expensive glove (Michael Jackson's) and the most expensive gown (Marilyn Monroe's) at auction. Thirteen guitars have sold publicly for more than a million dollars; Julien's sold five of them. "This is the only specialty auction house in the world that does entertainment at this level, and with such a wide breadth and depth—I mean, anyone from Mary Pickford to Amy Winehouse," Leila Dunbar, a former director of collectibles at Sotheby's, told me. "They did the Ringo Starr sale! You don't get much better than a Beatle." And yet Julien has a remarkably unfraught relationship to objects. He doesn't own much memorabilia himself, and the particular excesses of the collector's mind-set—the pride of the completist, the devouring appetite of the superfan—seem at odds with his cheerful, pragmatic demeanor.

Hours before the Nashville sale began, I found Julien bent over his laptop. He apologized for being distracted. "People have this vision of us as this massive company," he said. But he handles many administrative tasks himself. Bidders for the auction's highest-profile lots had to register in advance, and Julien was trying to ascertain whether the prospective clients actually had enough money to pay for them. "Sometimes it's

obvious, and sometimes you have to poke around on LinkedIn," he said.

As the room started to fill, I talked with Chad Cobain, an affable man in a flax-colored cardigan and checkered Vans. Chad had consigned a custom-made, left-handed sky-blue Fender Mustang, the last guitar played by Kurt Cobain, his brother. Kurt died, by suicide, in 1994, when Chad was fifteen. After the memorial service, Courtney Love, Kurt's widow, presented Chad with the guitar. Black masking tape covered the logo on the strap—Kurt's gesture of anti-corporate protest. Chad, who is right-handed, could never play the guitar very well. By the early two-thousands, he had stashed it in the closet of the one-bedroom apartment that he shared with his wife in Seattle. The sentiment had worn off; the guitar mostly made him nervous. "I couldn't afford to insure it—I was just worried about it all the time," he said. Chad reached out to Sotheby's, where Julien was working as a contractor. At the time, Julien's appraisal—thirty thousand dollars—struck Chad as too low; he held on to the guitar, eventually lending it to the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle, which kept it on display, alongside Grandmaster Flash's turntables and Jimi Hendrix's silk kimono, for eighteen years.

In 2015, the cardigan that Kurt wore during Nirvana's appearance on "MTV Unplugged" sold for a hundred and thirty-seven thousand dollars; four years later, it went for more than twice that. (Both sales were handled by Julien's.) Two of Kurt's guitars, a 1959 Martin D-18E, from the "Unplugged" show, and a 1969 Fender Mustang, from the "Smells Like Teen Spirit" video, also auctioned by Julien's, became the most and second most expensive guitars to be sold publicly—going for six million and four million dollars, respectively. (Material owned by celebrities who died young, like Cobain, often fetches a premium; an early death imbues objects with an added allure, and also means that supplies are limited. Julien told me that Cobain memorabilia is particularly collectible, because Nirvana's music appeals both to baby boomers and to wealthy millennials, increasing the likelihood of a bidding war.)

In September, 2023, Chad left Julien a voice mail. "I was thinking, Maybe in five years I'd sell it," he told me. Julien returned the call within minutes; a few weeks later, Chad agreed to consign the Fender. In Nashville, he seemed a little stunned. "It feels like this all happened two weeks ago," he told me. Julien's had given the guitar a low estimate of a million dollars. Chad told me that he had asked what kinds of people were likely to bid, and was told, basically, hedge-fund managers. "I was, like, 'O.K., gross,'" he said, shrugging. "But it makes sense."

The Fender was onstage, surrounded by a collection of Kurt ephemera: notebook pages covered in doodles and tortured ramblings, an empty pack of American Spirit cigarettes, an argyle sweater. These objects had come to Julien's from a man who had been Kurt's roommate in rehab. In early April, 1994, Kurt climbed over a wall to escape the facility, leaving his possessions behind; a week later, he was dead. Whereas certain kinds of memorabilia—baseball cards and comic books among them—are more valuable in pristine condition, the opposite is often true of celebrity-owned objects, whose buyers prefer a bodily trace of the former owner. (The "Unplugged" cardigan, which was until recently the most expensive sweater ever sold at auction, had a small amount of something brown and crusty, possibly dried vomit, in a pocket.)

Chad looked up at his brother's jeans on the stage. The auction house's high estimate was twenty thousand dollars. (They ended up selling for more than four hundred thousand.) "Courtney gave me a bunch of his clothes, too. I just wore them, and then I probably gave them to Goodwill," Chad said. "Looking at this, I'm, like, Oh, *man*. But I wasn't thinking about the hedge-fund managers when I was sixteen."

Two years ago, Kim Kardashian, an occasional bidder at Julien's auctions—she once bought a velvet jacket owned by Michael Jackson as a gift for her six-year-old daughter—reached out to Julien with an idea. For the red carpet of the Met Gala, Kardashian wanted to borrow the backless columnar dress that Marilyn Monroe wore when she serenaded John F. Kennedy at his forty-fifth-birthday party. In 2016, Julien's had sold the dress for nearly five million dollars. Julien approached the owner, the L.A. Ripley's Believe It or Not museum, on Kardashian's behalf. The negotiations were delicate. The dress was fragile; Monroe had been sewn into it hours before she sang to Kennedy. Ripley's suggested that Kardashian wear a replica. "Kim doesn't do replicas," Julien told them. The museum ultimately agreed to lend the original. Julien said that he "caught a lot of grief" from fashion historians for facilitating the loan. (A Fashion Institute of Technology professor told *People* that Kardashian's wearing the dress was "irresponsible and unnecessary.")

Celebrity is an elusive and unstable form of currency. Reputations can change quickly: Barbara Walters's estate sale, at Bonhams, netted millions less than the auction house had estimated; at Kirstie Alley's recent estate auction, many objects didn't meet their reserve prices. A lot of the objects that Julien's sells are mass-produced, with little intrinsic value. "We're more of a marketing company than anything," Julien told me. By this reasoning, procuring the dress for Kardashian was worth it. It generated headlines, plus it shored up Monroe's value for potential future bidders. "In a hundred years, the dress isn't going to be—it's a mesh, it's going to be disintegrated," Julien said. But, he added, of the dress's appearance at the gala, "it was *fun*, and it introduced Marilyn to a whole new generation."

Julien grew up in Indiana, where his father operated several granaries. His family expected that he would work in agriculture, but his attention was elsewhere. "Indiana is an auction state," he told me. Farmers bid on livestock in echoing barns; if a couple can't agree on a divorce settlement, a judge might order an auction of their marital property, with the proceeds split down the middle.

Julien was enthralled by the auctioneers' incantatory patter and their casual command of the room. He was an indifferent student but an enthusiastic entrepreneur, hawking his father's castoffs at flea markets on the weekend. "I'd be this seven- or eight-year-old kid with a Weedwacker, telling people, 'Let me tell you why you have to buy this,'" he said. At sixteen, he moved into an apartment by himself in Auburn, in the heart of auction country, to attend a better high school. The town was home to the

Reppert Auction School, which taught students how to perform the auction chant—the rhythmic, repetitive solicitation of bids that's sometimes called the cattle rattle. Auburn was the headquarters of Kruse International, whose vintage-car auctions became a worldwide phenomenon in the eighties. Its annual Labor Day auction featured rotating stages, celebrity attendees, and a parade of historic vehicles; it was, at one point, the third most attended event in Indiana. Mitchell Kruse, the company's former owner and C.E.O., worked his first auction in Tulsa, in 1981, when he was a sophomore in high school. "It was the peak of the oil boom, and I'm telling you, it was incredible," he told me. Buyers were hungry for rarities. "It was like a *Who's Who* of the rich and famous—hundred-thousand-dollar watches, everyone wanting to one-up the other guy." Four years later, when Kruse was twenty, he sold the first car to go for a million dollars in cash. One year, when the featured Labor Day lot was the Batmobile, Kruse received a call from Ross Perot. "He said, 'I'm looking at your catalogue, and I'm looking at this Batmobile. Can fire come out of that?'" Kruse told me. "And I said, 'Yes, it can shoot flames, sir.'"

Julien started working for Kruse. He knew that he didn't have the confidence to be an auctioneer, so he dreamed of being a ringman—the person who keeps an eye on bidders and relays information to the auctioneer with hand signals.

After he graduated from high school, Julien expanded a business selling pneumatic tennis-ball-serving machines which he'd started as a teen-ager, with a friend's father. The work got him out of the Midwest—once, he went to the U.S. Open with Andre Agassi, whose father had advised on the machine's design—but the upside was limited. "The tennis-ball-machine business wasn't going to take me anywhere," he said. In the mid-nineties, Julien returned to Indiana to run Kruse's Labor Day auction. A few years later, he was on Johnny Cash's tour bus, celebrating a successful auction of the singer's classic cars, when Cash asked him what he planned to do with the rest of his life. Julien confessed that he loved auctions but hated cars. It was the *stuff* that appealed to him.

In August, 1926, Rudolph Valentino died, at the age of thirty-one, from complications of a ruptured ulcer. Three months later, his business manager, George Ullman, put Valentino's possessions up for public sale—not only his speedboat, his onyx pocket watch, and his black velvet riding habit but also his spats and silk underwear and a hundred and forty-six pairs of his socks. The auction drew oil millionaires, "flapperish girls," and "tourist wives of Middle Western farmers," according to newspaper accounts. Almost everything the actor owned—even his pet dogs and horses—was for sale. But Ullman held a few things back: collar buttons, cuff links, certain pairs of shoes. The items "almost talked to me," Ullman told a friend. "I couldn't stand to watch them go to strangers."

Celebrity auctions typically used to be a result of "the three 'D's—death, divorce, or debt," Laura Woolley, a longtime pop-culture appraiser and a managing director at Julien's, told me. The most iconic sales involved celebrities who were elegant, wealthy, and no longer living. When Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's estate was auctioned off, in 1996, Sotheby's sold more than a hundred thousand copies of the catalogue. In 1987, Wallis Simpson's jewelry collection brought in fifty-five million dollars from bidders including Elizabeth Taylor and Joan Collins.

According to George Newman, a professor of organizational psychology and marketing at the University of Toronto who has studied celebrity auctions, the psychological principle driving buyers is the idea of contagion, sometimes summarized as "once in contact, always in contact." On some level, we are convinced that a person's essence passes into the objects that he handles. "It's nothing material—it's more like a magical belief that these objects have acquired . . . something," Newman told me. "And that belief seems to have a real effect on the amount of money people are willing to pay." A researcher who interviewed members of the Central Midwest Barry Manilow Fan Club in the nineties found that their most valued items were "things in the collection that actually touched Barry"; in an experiment, when subjects were told that a celebrity-owned sweater had been sterilized, their willingness to pay for it declined significantly. (The opposite was true when it came to infamous people. Subjects tended to say that they wouldn't wear a sweater owned by Hitler; sterilizing the hypothetical sweater, though, made them regard it more favorably.)

Julien eventually left Kruse and moved to California, where he made connections with the collectibles department at Sotheby's. "He was extremely persistent and very earnest," Dunbar, of Sotheby's, said. In 2003, Julien established his own auction house; Martin Nolan, a tall, droll Irishman with a background in finance, later joined him as the company's chief financial officer and, eventually, its co-owner.

In 2006, Cher enlisted Julien's, which had a half-dozen employees, to run a sale. She was redecorating her home—"going from a neo-Gothic look to Zen Buddhist," Nolan recalled—and had lots of candelabras and heavy oak lecterns to off-load. She also understood that an auction could promote a living celebrity. "She said she'd rather put needles in her eyes than have a bad catalogue," Nolan said. Specialists from Sotheby's, which co-sponsored the sale, appraised the obviously high-value items—diamond jewelry, Bob Mackie gowns—while Julien kept an eye out for objects with more personal qualities, such as her dictionary and her high-school biology workbook. He fished a table lamp made from a taxidermied armadillo out of the dumpster after Cher told him that it had been a gift from Gene Simmons, whom she had dated. On the day of the auction, Cher was so nervous that she'd be judged for selling her stuff—or, worse, that no one would want to buy it—that she arranged to be out of the country. But the lots sold even faster than Julien had expected; the armadillo lamp went for upward of four thousand dollars, more than ten times the estimate.

These days, any sense that it's unseemly for living stars to auction off

their things has evaporated. "Ringo, he was the last person who was really concerned about that. Now nobody cares," Julien said. "All these people have storage units. And Live Nation doesn't take a cut of memorabilia sales." As streaming has reduced the revenue that comes from making albums, such sales have proved appealing to musicians. When I visited the Julien's Auctions headquarters, in a warehouse building on the industrial fringes of Los Angeles, I spied a stack of glossy catalogues featuring various celebrity names, Dolly Parton and Bob Dylan among them. These were mockups that Julien's uses to entice potential clients: the auction catalogue as a kind of ghostwritten autobiography, a life told through objects.

Wringing money out of a star's image and objects can be emotionally and ethically precarious. In 2008, Julien's was hired to clear out Neverland Ranch, Michael Jackson's fantastical estate near Santa Barbara, and prepare its contents for auction. The job had an air of desperation to it. Jackson was in dire financial straits. The property—twenty-seven hundred acres—had sat empty for some time, and the on-site amusement park had an eerie, weathered atmosphere. Julien's hired a crew of thirty to sort through everything. "There's the house, the theatre, the zoo, the tepee village, the big railroad station, the small railroad station," Nolan said. "We were working day and night." Julien thought that the auction would net at least fifteen million dollars, so the company took out loans to finance the job. (Julien's typically receives about a thirty-five-per-cent commission.) "Everything was dependent on this," Julien said. "How we agreed to take it on, I have no idea. We were naïve."

In April, 2009, a month before the auction, Jackson's production company, M.J.J. Productions, sued to stop it, claiming that Julien's was attempting to sell items that were "priceless and irreplaceable," and which Jackson had intended to keep. ("We have been accommodating any requests made by Michael Jackson for the past eight months," Julien told CNN. "If it is true, and he is stating that there are items he does not want sold, why would he have ever given us the items in the first place? We are an auction house, and that is all that we do. We are not a mover or storage facility.") As the case made its way through the courts, Julien's installed an elaborate auction preview in a former department store in Beverly Hills. Ultimately, Julien's and M.J.J. Productions agreed to a settlement, and the possessions were returned to Jackson; two months later, he died.

"Nine out of ten doctors are in the wrong room."

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By the time the auctioneer, wearing a bow tie and thick-rimmed glasses, introduced the first lot at the Hard Rock Café, the room was fizzy with anticipation. The big item that night was Eric Clapton's 1964 electric Gibson, believed to have been a gift from George Harrison. "You feel like you're going back fifty years by just picking it up," one middle-aged man told me reverently. Most bidding at Julien's auctions happens remotely, either online or over the phone, but some prospective buyers still like to show up in person. A group of chatty, buoyant people sat at a table cluttered with drinks. Across from them, a man in a dark suit sat alone, a sheaf of papers in front of him, his shoulders braced in the tense posture of someone who has been authorized to spend a million dollars of his boss's money. This was Larry Hall, who was bidding on Clapton's guitar on behalf of Jim Irsay, the owner of the Indianapolis Colts and a major collector of pop-culture objects. Irsay's collection, which he hopes to turn into a museum one day, includes the original scroll manuscript of "On the Road," Muhammad Ali's boxing shoes, John F. Kennedy's rocking chair, and a "Wanted" poster for John Wilkes Booth.

Various people in the memorabilia world had pitched me on the idea of celebrity-owned objects as undervalued assets. "Clients are looking at these pieces like they would a piece of art," Dunbar, who left Sotheby's to run her own business appraising pop-culture memorabilia, said. "You could have a Warhol on your wall, or you could have Michael Jordan's Game One 1998 N.B.A.-finals jersey." Some of Julien's clients have bought high-profile pieces and flipped them a few years later for a significant profit. Earlier that week, Julien had spoken with a bidder interested in the Clapton guitar. "I said, 'Look, if you got this for two million, it would be a steal,'" he told me. " 'You could probably resell it in a few years.'" As we waited for the guitar to come up for sale, I asked one attendee, a vice-president at Credit Suisse, who didn't want to be named, if he thought of his purchases as investments. He gave me a pitying look. "That's what

you tell your wife," he said. "No, this is purely a passion business."

The auctioneer, straight-faced, declared the Gibson, with its "custom psychedelic finish," to be "the greatest guitar in the history of guitars." Within seconds, Hall had bid a million dollars. Julien conferred on the phone with another prospective buyer, then gave a decisive negative shake of his head. The auctioneer swooped his hands like an orchestra conductor, trying to coax more money from the room. Even the boozy table grew hushed. "Clapton became the man he is, the guitarist he is, on this guitar, and you can have that for $1.25 million," the auctioneer said. No one moved; it seemed as though we might be cheated of the drama of a bidding war. The auctioneer banged his gavel and declared the lot sold, and Hall's face spasmed with joy. "We got it!" he said to no one in particular. "We got it!" Later, I watched him grasp the hand of a well-wisher. "I feel like I just stole a guitar," he said.

Chad Cobain left the auction early. Kurt's guitar was slotted to come up for sale the next day. "I'll probably just watch from the hotel room," he told me. "It's going to be emotional." (The Mustang ended up selling for $1.5 million, to a Japanese businessman who plans to put it on display in a music-themed café.)

Although the market for seven-figure guitars is limited, auction houses see memorabilia, and collectibles more broadly, as an area of "great growth potential," Natasha Degen, the chair of the art-market-studies department at F.I.T., told me. "It appreciated dramatically during COVID," Dunbar said. "People were at home, they were nostalgic, they had money, the auctions were accessible. And it was sort of a circle—the more people bid the prices up, the more people got interested." Celebrity auction houses like Julien's have been taking cues from the world of sports. Fanatics, the sports-collectibles juggernaut, has been particularly ingenious at capitalizing on the fandom economy. The company sells collectibles featuring small slices of balls, bases, pucks, and nets from N.H.L. and M.L.B. games; for fifty dollars, you can buy a Yankees-branded pen that comes with a sprinkling of "authentic game-used dirt."

Nolan spoke about the machinery of sports-memorabilia sales with some envy. "Players are sometimes wearing a different jersey each quarter," he said. "It's sent off and available in the market tomorrow."

Julien's has begun encouraging the musicians it works with to think of their clothing as a commodity. "We encourage, we *educate* them: 'When you get done with the concert, put the jeans, the shirt, the shoes in a bag with the date and the city to put in the archives, because that could be ten, twenty, thirty thousand dollars,'" Julien said. "It's like printing money for a lot of these celebrities."

In Nashville, I chatted with Ricky Limon, a genial, tattooed man who's worked at Julien's since the Neverland Ranch days. He was idly looking through the auction lots online, scrolling past the guitars to the items with three- and four-figure estimates: Elvis's Phillips 66 charge card, Elvis's membership card from the International Kenpo Karate Association, Elvis's father's Bible. In Limon's years at Julien's, he has bid on and won a handful of items, including David Hasselhoff's leather-lined trenchcoat and a scepter that once belonged to Marlon Brando. There's a talisman for every taste: Joan Didion's collection of pebbles and seashells (recently sold at auction for seven thousand dollars); Paul Newman's pocketknife (eight thousand dollars).

Mary Desjardins, a professor of film and media studies at Dartmouth, compared such items to saints' relics. "Something like Elvis's gas card—that has little value to someone who's a historian or a scholar of Elvis," she said. "It really doesn't have anything to do with his talent, or his history as a performer. It's just because Elvis touched it, because it belonged to him. It's a bit of a fetish object. And the way fetish objects work, they're sort of magical, in that the proximity to them, the touching of them, gives you some sort of power or sense of self that can't be acquired otherwise."

Proximity to a celebrity's death can lend an object an additional, ghoulish frisson; this seems to be particularly true when the celebrity died under tragic circumstances. In 2020, a seller was shopping around an album that John Lennon had autographed for Mark David Chapman, who later fatally shot him. "Yoko said, 'Please don't,'" Julien told me; he passed on the consignment. (Another auction house sold the album, for nearly a million dollars.) Two years after Michael Jackson's fatal overdose, Julien's put the bed where he died up for sale. After Jackson's family objected, the house pulled the listing.

On some occasions, the company has shown a more flexible sense of propriety. Julien's has sold William Shatner's kidney stone and Truman Capote's ashes. ("Truman Capote loved the ele-

"He's already rolling over."

ment of shock," Julien said at the time. "He loved publicity. And I'm sure he's looking down, laughing, and saying, 'That's something I would have done.'") This spring, Julien's plans to auction off a burial crypt in a West Hollywood mausoleum. The crypt, situated in the Corridor of Memories, is a row above and four spaces to the left of Marilyn Monroe's, and even closer to Hugh Hefner's. (Hefner bought the space next to Monroe, whom he had never met, in 2009. "I'm a believer in things symbolic," he told the Los Angeles *Times*. "Spending eternity next to Marilyn is too sweet to pass up.") A man had offered to consign the burial space to Julien's a few years earlier. When Julien went to visit it, he was surprised to see that someone was already interred there. "I told him, 'I can't sell a crypt with somebody *in* it,'" Julien told me. "He goes, 'Oh, that's my mom. I'm thinking about moving her.'" The crypt, newly vacant, has an estimate of at least two hundred thousand dollars.

In November, Laura Woolley, the Julien's managing director, met me at the company's main warehouse, in L.A. Woolley started out in the Sotheby's collectibles department, then did a stint at Julien's during its early days—her job involved watching every episode of the "Sonny & Cher" show to determine the provenance of clothing for the Cher auction—before opening her own appraisal business specializing in pop-culture memorabilia. Her steady, skeptical gaze struck me as familiar, and I realized that I'd seen her on "Antiques Roadshow," where she regularly appears as an expert.

She returned to Julien's last year, when the company went on a hiring spree. (It now has three dozen employees.) Julien's had a new C.E.O., David Goodman, a former executive at Sotheby's, with ambitious plans for expansion. "We're really bullish on collecting behavior," he told me. "We want a constant drumbeat of sales." (Julien and Nolan have stayed on, as co-executive directors.)

Like many people who work in memorabilia, Woolley doesn't own much of it herself. This surprised me, until she led me into the warehouse, where Julien's stores objects slated for future sales. My overwhelming impression was of *stuff*, everywhere, any individual mystique diluted by the sheer exhausting quantity of it all. We walked down long aisles, past a rapper's sneaker collection, an insectoid claw from a "Starship Troopers" alien, a wooden chair owned by an actor from "Gunsmoke," and a scuffed road case with "Mick Fleetwood" stamped on it. Woolley lifted a protective sheet; underneath was a sleek black Corvette Stingray that once belonged to Slash. A velvet chair with golden fringe looked tacky to me until Woolley explained that it had once belonged to Janet Jackson. The chair shimmered, briefly, with an aura of specialness; then we moved on.

Woolley said that, despite a life spent among famous people's detritus, she still finds that some objects have an inexplicable resonance. "The hair on the back of your neck stands up," she said. "I can't explain it."

In 1999, Christie's held an auction of Marilyn Monroe's things. "That was a watershed moment," Woolley said. "People were paying, like, thirty-seven thousand dollars for a Polaroid of her dog." Monroe had left her personal effects and the bulk of her intellectual property to her acting teacher Lee Strasberg. After a decades-long probate process, they were eventually inherited by Strasberg's third wife, Anna, who licensed the actress's image liberally and enlisted Christie's to sell the possessions. (Julien's has since sold further remnants from Monroe's life, including her prescription-pill bottles, her tax returns, a letter to her psychiatrist, and a lock of her hair.)

Before the auction, Woolley was alone in the warehouse, cataloguing some of Monroe's items—"*intimate* things," she said. Hairpins, undergarments. The bras were lumpy and misshapen, because they were padded with sawdust. Handling them, Woolley felt a heaviness come over her, "a sense of, This is not what she would have wanted." She felt an overwhelming urge to apologize. "So I started talking to Marilyn. Like a crazy person. Like, 'I'm so sorry that this is happening to your stuff. But I'm going to try to do it with as much respect as possible.' Regardless of how it all turned out for her." She let out a sharp, short laugh. "Yeah," she said. "Talking to a ghost in a warehouse by myself. This is the reality of what we do." ♦

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U.S. JOURNAL

CITY OF THIEVES

In L.A., cops battle crime rings that steal everything from purses to power tools.

BY PAIGE WILLIAMS

A dozen detectives from the California Highway Patrol gathered in a Los Angeles-area parking lot the other morning for an operational briefing. In about twenty minutes, they would drive to a nearby Home Depot, where customers were known to regularly wheel carts of merchandise out the door without paying, and to stick power tools down their pants. The investigators had planned a nightlong "blitz"—surveillance, arrest, repeat. Anyone caught stealing would be handcuffed, led to a back room, and questioned: What did you plan to do with these items? Did you take them on behalf of someone else? The goal was not to micro-police shoplifting but to discover and disrupt networks engaged in organized retail crime, a burgeoning area of criminal investigation.

A booster is a professional thief who typically sells to a fence—someone who resells stolen materials. A fence may buy a hundred-dollar drill from a booster for thirty bucks, to resell it for sixty. Or he may pay in drugs. In sworn testimony before a House committee on homeland security, Scott Glenn, Home Depot's vice-president of asset protection, recently accused criminal organizations of recruiting vulnerable people into retail-theft schemes by preying on their need for "fast cash" or fentanyl. A fence may unload boosted goods at a swap meet, or at a store where illicit items are "washed" by commingling them with legitimate ones. Pilfered commodities often wind up online. Early in the pandemic, the pivot to e-commerce yielded new players eager to exploit the rogue freedoms of under-regulated commercial spaces. Amazon, eBay, OfferUp, Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace—bazaarland. The detectives in the parking lot, who were detailed to, or working with, the highway patrol's Organized Retail Crime Task Force, had been trying to keep up. "If we could just get back to the days when we were dealing with the *career* criminals, it would be more manageable," Captain Jeff Loftin, who heads a group of investigative units in the C.H.P.'s Southern Division, told me. "Now we're having to deal with everybody and their brother, and trying to find out who *they* are."

In the parking lot, Tom Probart, a bushily mustachioed detective in his thirties, distributed maps of the Home Depot's layout and exits. Suspects rarely flee through Gardening, he told the other officers. The store's back door opened onto a high wall, leaving the main entrance and Lumber as thieves' likelier choices of egress. Probart pronounced "lumber" as "lumbar," and his colleagues immediately gave him the appropriate amount of shit.

A two-officer "takedown" team would make arrests the moment a suspect left the store. "Let's get them right away," the task force's supervisor, Sergeant Jimmy Eberhart, a soft-spoken perfectionist with a goatee and tattoo

The California Highway Patrol has recovered more than thirty-eight million dollars' worth of hot merchandise.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHILIP MONTGOMERY

sleeves, told the officers. Foot pursuits and physical harm could be prevented with "the element of surprise—being on top of these guys before they even know we're there."

On the edge of the briefing circle stood half a dozen young men; one was wearing a sports jersey, another a Mickey Mouse sweatshirt. Don't mistake them for suspects, Probart cautioned the C.H.P. detectives. The men were Home Depot loss-prevention employees—L.P.s—whose job is to prevent and investigate theft. L.P.s are not law-enforcement officers, though some used to be, and they have no arrest powers. In fact, a Home Depot employee can be fired for intervening in a theft. (A company spokesman has said, "No merchandise or other asset is worth risking the life of our associates or customers, which is why we have a strict policy against pursuing a shoplifter in a manner that creates a safety risk for anyone.") Yet many organized-retail-crime investigations start with an L.P., who, like a private eye, may build a case by logging thefts, compiling names, taking photographs, and covertly following suspects around town. An energetic young L.P. shared with the task-force members a snapshot of a known booster who favored plumbing supplies, and said, "He really likes this store."

At the Home Depot, some of the undercover officers waited behind the tinted windows of their unmarked Nissans and Jeeps; others went inside. Detective Amy Rodriguez, wearing skinny jeans and her hair in a sleek ponytail, strolled through the front door like a bored teen-ager, sipping from an In-N-Out Burger cup. A stubbled career detective called Cap, who was known for edging daringly close to surveilled subjects, wore a plaid flannel over a faded T-shirt. "If we were going to Beverly Hills or Macy's, I'd probably dress a little differently," he told me. (Yeah, no, Eberhart said later—Cap always dresses like that.) To the average person, the investigators would appear to be everyday shoppers, pondering paint chips or toilets.

Rodriguez and Probart slipped into a cramped office, to monitor surveillance feeds and to run comms. The officers were carrying department-issued radios, and everyone was using a cellphone app that allowed them to relay observations discreetly, via earbuds. With each app message, Eberhart, parked outside in a Ram truck, heard a noirish chime. His police radio dribbled tipoffs: "Black hat, black jacket, main entrance"; "Backward Dodger hat"; "Two white male adults opening packages." The detectives and the L.P.s, both of whose teams were racially diverse, singled out subjects based on telltale behavior. A booster may pace, or glance around a lot. He may park too close to the entrance, carry an oddly large bag, or wear an unseasonably heavy coat.

At some blitzes, investigators may catch a dozen people or more. Over the course of this operation, they nabbed eight. A detective would say, "Takedown, takedown," and two uniformed officers would step out of a hiding place and speak quietly to the man (all of the suspects were men) as they handcuffed him. The store products in his possession were catalogued as evidence and deposited into Home Depot carts, to be returned to inventory: Tide detergent, Bounty paper towels, a space heater, a stud detector. Investigators led each suspect past fragrant lengths of sawn wood to the interview room, an employee break area. Each arrest took less than three minutes. The team would then get back into position.

Los Angeles is among the world's largest shopping environments. The metropolitan area's diverse convergence of stores, street markets, warehouses, cargo ships, interstates, freight trains, and luxury goods—along with its wealth disparity, street gangs, and proximity to the Mexican border—make it singularly conducive to criminal enterprise. During the pandemic, the retail landscape suffered. Now brick-and-mortar shopping is rebounding. Chanel recently opened a multistory emporium on Rodeo Drive, its largest store in the United States.

Last year, L.A. endured what became known as Flash Rob Summer. On August 1st, nearly a dozen masked people swarmed a Gucci boutique and fled with armloads of merchandise. On August 8th, at least thirty people snatched more than three hundred thousand dollars' worth of items at an Yves Saint Laurent store and left in a fleet of getaway cars. Four days later: Sunglass Hut. The same day, at a Nordstrom, dozens of people dressed in dark clothes ransacked the designer-handbag department, toppling mannequins. Another day, at a Nike store, a witness yelled "Where's security?" while recording a man and a woman calmly filling garbage bags with clothes and shoes before walking out the front door.

When Eberhart teaches other agencies' officers what he has learned about investigating organized retail crime, one of his PowerPoint slides notes a "disturbing trend." On social media, outlaw networks recruit employees of retail businesses or credit facilities to, say, steal a customer's identity or knowingly run a pinched credit card. (What's more, employees may assist with a theft, in what the retail industry calls "sweethearting.")

Before a job, boosters study a store's layout and identify what they want to take. Rip crews—teams of robbers, communicating via encrypted apps—often wear hooded clothing, complicating efforts to identify faces. On the ground, they may signal one another audibly—one group mimicked birdcalls while hitting a Macy's perfume counter in Sherman Oaks. Crews may be fulfilling a shopping list from a fence, who may be fulfilling an order from another criminal operator. The most successful rip crews are focussed and undeterred. At the Nordstrom flash rob, the thieves dragged entire metal racks out the door by their security cables. At an Apple Store in Fresno, a booster once knocked a Good Samaritan flat as he and several conspirators fled with nearly thirty thousand dollars' worth of laptops and phones. Flash robbers usually vanish before the police have time to arrive.

Videos of these crimes tend to go viral, making flash robberies seem more common than they actually are. A CNBC International clip headlined "Watch an Apple store get robbed in 12 seconds" has been viewed thirty-two million times. In a popular Instagram video of the Nordstrom hit, a woman, witnessing the heist, yells "Yo, they wilding the fuck out!" and then tells the thieves, "Run! Y'all gotta work together!" Pointing her lens at a handbag abandoned in the road, still cabled to

its stand, she says, "He left a Y.S.L. purse!" and "Can I go get the purse?" Online comments about retail theft tend to break down as either anti-crime or anti-capitalist. "They're a billion dollar company and y'all are acting like someone robbed your grandma," one person wrote, referring to the assault on Nordstrom. Another responded, "Without stores and jobs cities will lose income and cut services. Then you complain because the city isn't picking up trash, or repairing the roads, or replacing the street lights." Others are more interested in methodology: "How do 20 ppl agree to commit crime together? cant even get my friends to agree on a restaurant."

Eberhart's unit, which focusses on the less showy aspects of organized retail crime, works out of a tight, windowless office just north of downtown, in an aging fortress shared by homicide detectives and by a squad that reconstructs traffic accidents using advanced math. Eberhart, who is fastidious by nature, covers his desk in plastic whenever he's away, because the ceiling tiles leak. A Batman meme hangs over Rodriguez's corner, captioned "Lie to me again." At any given moment, long tables may be covered in piles of Old Navy jeans or Victoria's Secret bras confiscated in the latest raid. By the time I embedded with the task force, in January, the C.H.P. had recovered more than thirty-eight million dollars' worth of merchandise and made more than two thousand arrests in cases involving organized retail crime. The highway patrol created the task force in 2019, after California lawmakers codified such thefts as a distinct offense.

The law, authored by a Democrat, applies to two or more people working together to steal with the intent to sell, exchange, or return the illicit goods for value, or conspiring to knowingly receive, buy, or possess stolen merchandise. It is also illegal to steal on behalf of someone else, and to coördinate and finance such theft. California's governor, Gavin Newsom, also a Democrat, tapped the C.H.P. for the first organized-retail-crime task force in part because the agency has statewide authority, and because criminal networks exploit the state's jurisdictional mishmash of penalties. During the pandemic, Los Angeles County imposed a zero-bail policy for most nonviolent offenders, to mitigate mass incarceration. Certain defendants now receive a citation and a court date, and are let go. Voters had already elected to raise the monetary threshold for felony theft, from four hundred dollars to nine hundred and fifty. Critics—and even suspects—have asserted that the combined effect of these approaches invites crime. Rodriguez told me, "We'll catch people from the Bay Area and say, 'What're you doing down here?' They'll say, 'I know if I come to L.A. you're just gonna give me a ticket.'" Last summer, after Los Angeles's mayor, Karen Bass, announced a new focus on organized retail crime—"*No* Angeleno should feel like it is not safe to go shopping"—the district attorney for Orange County, Todd Spitzer, complained that Bass and the L.A. County district attorney, George Gascón, were contending with a problem that they, as progressives, had helped to create. Spitzer claimed that their stances had resulted in "decriminalization, decarceration and zero bail," which had led to "this unrest and emboldened these organized crews."

Los Angeles consistently ranks as the city with the worst organized-retail-crime problem, according to the National Retail Federation, the industry's largest lobbyist organization. In September, Newsom announced the awarding of two hundred and sixty-seven million dollars in new funding to address the issue. The L.A.P.D. and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department were each promised more than fifteen million dollars. Dozens of other cities and counties in California, competing for three-year grants, proposed buying security cameras, license-plate readers, computers, and drones. In

several jurisdictions, the police planned to conduct retailer "training," during which officers may teach employees how to be "a good witness" or how to fortify their stores. Lieutenant Mike McComas, who runs the L.A.P.D.'s organized-retail-crime task force, told me, "Shoes are a hot item, so maybe instead of putting out a complete set of shoes you put out only the right shoe." He added, "Uniformed security, if you can afford it, is great."

At Home Depot, I asked Eberhart if he thought that staking out a big-box store was a good use of time and funding. (The task force has conducted roughly a hundred retail blitzes so far.) "I think it's necessary," he replied. "It's good on several levels. It's good public awareness—shows what we're doing. We've had people thank us for being out here. We've had people say, 'I have to pay for stuff, so should they.' It's true. It's also a good deterrent, to see us out here. Home Depot likes it because it deters theft and shows that they're not gonna just stand down and let people go in there and steal stuff."

The Los Angeles County public defender, Ricardo D. García, told me that he objects to the state spending so much taxpayer money on helping businesses and law enforcement while allocating insufficient amounts for public defenders. California is one of the states where counties, not the state itself, are primarily responsible for funding the defense of indigent people. An influx of arrests "is going to create more cases for us," García said, "and we *already* are strapped for resources." He observed that a "war on drugs" type of approach only "overfills our jails with people who need help with food, with housing, with medical treatment," and said, "This mistaken return to a tough-on-crime era undoes decades' worth of good work."

One Monday just before dawn, the task force's detectives pulled up to a bungalow in a residential neighborhood near a freeway. Roosters were crowing. An officer positioned his cruiser in front of the house, blared the siren, then said, via loudspeaker, "This is the California Highway Patrol. We have a search warrant for your residence. Come out with your hands up." The target, a man in his forties, soon emerged, barefoot and scowling, and was taken into custody. "We know there's more of you in there," the officer said. Six or seven more people materialized, including a couple of teenagers. The main suspect and a woman were loaded into separate vehicles.

The sun rose, and we could see a big rig in the driveway and a monster truck with a custom license plate, "STOMP-U." The property also had a garage and a shed. The investigators had reason to believe they would discover products that had gone missing from two home-supply stores, Floor & Decor and Harbor Freight Tools. The search warrant authorized L.P.s to participate. Once the officers secured the grounds, the L.P.s moved in with inventory-tracking software and a U-Haul. Loftin and I watched from the sidewalk as the L.P.s dollied out a Predator Super Quiet Inverter generator, Hunter ceiling fans, staple guns, a three-ton jack. The detectives know what they are looking for, but they never know what they will find. Loftin recalled a case in which investigators, scrutinizing a suspect's home online, noticed that a Google Street View camera happened to have taken a photograph while the garage door was open: "Floor to ceiling, all kinds of power tools."

The search of the bungalow yielded about thirteen thousand dollars' worth of allegedly stolen materials, along with an illegal snub-nosed revolver, ammunition, and, in a zippered case on top of a refrigerator, dozens of bindles of cocaine. The detectives hoped to glean valuable information from the suspect: the home-improvement items were clearly going somewhere, and had come from somewhere. Boosters steal from trucks, warehouses, and freight trains, in addition to stores. Internet-savvy criminals are able to maximize supply-chain vulnerabilities in part because so much real-time shipping information can be found online. Cargo theft is such a problem that the C.H.P. long ago dedicated a specialized unit to it: more than thirty per cent of containerized imports arrive at the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. A booster with enough information (and chutzpah) may present forged documents at a transport point and drive off with an entire load.

A lot of that loot goes back overseas. "That's where they're making their money," Loftin said. In the early two-thousands, as the Internet became a force multiplier for those looking to anonymously move stolen goods at scale, law-enforcement officers began finding illicit truckloads of cigarettes, Advil, Crest Whitestrips. Arrests have been tied to gangs, including MS-13, which was started in L.A. In 2002, an ex-member of MS-13, Brenda Paz, told the authorities about some of her former associates' fencing activities, which have reportedly been linked to transactions involving possible affiliates of Hamas and other international terrorist organizations. Paz entered a witness-protection program, but got lonely and resurfaced. Gang members stabbed her to death. She was a teenager, and pregnant.

Eberhart, who is fifty, joined the California Highway Patrol at the age of twenty-one, after toying with the idea of following his father, a prop master at "The Carol Burnett Show," into the motion-picture industry. Before focussing on organized retail crime, he worked K-9, and vehicle theft, including three years on a complex, deep-cover operation involving motorcycles. The organized-retail-crime assignment was thought to be temporary—the task force was initially scheduled to "sunset" in 2021, but it has been extended to 2026. "The amount of theft blew my *mind*, even being in law enforcement and seeing crime my entire career," Eberhart told me.

Last fall, the C.H.P. detectives became suspicious of a makeup store in East Los Angeles, next door to a cobbler and across the street from a place selling "spiritual candles." The cosmetics shop's marquee, the nicest around, showed a fancifully sketched woman with glamorous eyelashes and

red lips. Inside, health and beauty products were displayed on glass shelves in attractive pyramids and orderly rows. The shop was active on Facebook and Instagram. The detectives learned that its proprietor also owned a liquidation warehouse, which advertised everything from Victoria's Secret bags to Clinique moisturizer to Born to Glow!, a complexion brightener. The proprietor's specialty, according to the business's Web site, was "sourcing makeup and skin care products" found in reputable "chain stores." The shop's Instagram page showed off a new Tesla and praised Bitcoin as "a life changing game."

During searches of the store and the warehouse, officers recovered more than three million dollars' worth of allegedly stolen items. Much of the haul was tracked to CVS, which Eberhart, before he started working the retail-crime beat, had thought of as little more than a place to buy Tylenol. The liquidator, a woman in her late forties, was charged with a range of felonies. Fences often claim to have made an innocent mistake, but Eberhart believes that it's reasonable to expect due diligence from retailers: "You're buying off the street, there's no paper trail, you're buying for pennies on the dollar—you don't think it possibly could be stolen?"

Nobody knows how often these sorts of schemes happen, because there are no comprehensive national statistics on organized retail crime. The loosely defined category usually involves a welter of offenses—grand larceny, possession of stolen property, burglary, cybercrime, fraud—which may be defined and prosecuted differently depending on the jurisdiction. ("Organized retail crime is not shoplifting where someone's going in and stealing a commodity or food that they need personally," Sean Duryee, the California Highway Patrol commissioner, told me. "Organized retail crime is *greed*.")

When state lawmakers pass organized-retail-crime legislation, as dozens have done in recent years, they often cite data provided by the N.R.F., the retailers' association, which gathers its information through research and an annual survey. The N.R.F. has reported that in 2021 retailers suffered more than ninety billion dollars in "shrink," the catchall term for inventory losses. The organization later had to retract its own stat regarding how much of the shrink involved organized retail crime. It was not "nearly half," as initially asserted; estimates now indicate that it was significantly less. Critics used the inaccuracy to characterize the association as the self-serving perpetrator of a "hysteria" campaign designed to undo criminal-justice reforms and justify more police funding. A group called the Center for Just Journalism has accused the news media of abetting an N.R.F. "hoax," noting that "cops are salivating" at the chance to "get real money to fight a fake crime wave." Many mainstream news outlets echoed this view.

In February, David Johnston, the N.R.F.'s vice-president of asset protection and retail operations, wrote, in an open letter, that "media coverage that focuses on the known data problems gives many critics an unwarranted excuse to downplay the seriousness of these crimes and delay efforts to address them." (National shoplifting rates have declined by seven per cent since 2019, but L.A. is an outlier: such thefts were up by seventy-six per cent in the same time period.) Retailers have long pushed Congress to pass a federal organized-retail-crime law, which, by filling data voids, would help clarify the scope of the problem. (Last year, Congress did pass the INFORM Consumers Act, requiring online marketplaces to collect and verify information on third-party sellers.) In a recent congressional hearing on the subject, Summer Stephan, the president-elect of the National District Attorneys Association, told lawmakers that law enforcement first needs to determine "the size of the monster."

Two days after the Home Depot blitz, Eberhart and his detectives drove to an electrical-supply store on a dead-end street in East L.A. Numerous American flags flew over the store's roll-away door. The operational handout from the team's 6 A.M. briefing said that the owner was "believed to be linked to approximately 30 thefts" from Home Depot and Lowe's stores throughout California. There were mug shots of the owner, a white-haired man in his seventies, and his circle, all of whom had been under surveillance for weeks. "We already know who our players are," Eberhart told me. The detectives moved in on an employee as he unlocked the shop.

Before long, the owner arrived in the back seat of a C.H.P. cruiser, looking sour; he had been detained in a traffic stop near his home. He claimed to have receipts for the items that a squadron of L.P.s was stacking in the barricaded street. The proprietor spent the rest of the day sifting through paperwork in his rat's nest of a shop, under guard, ultimately producing next to nothing. By nightfall, the street was crowded with apparently hot merchandise: carbon-monoxide detectors, Leviton tamper-resistant outlets, and, notably, hundreds of heavy spools of copper and electrical wiring, the most expensive of which can retail for more than seven hundred dollars. Rodriguez pointed to some boxed circuit breakers and said, "Those are expensive, too. They're super hard to find. And now I know why—they're all here."

The next night, Eberhart and I were parked between a hamburger joint and a vacant lot prowled by feral cats. As we waited for something to happen during a blitz at a discount-shoe warehouse, we watched a man in a cook's apron arrive at the parking lot in a battered S.U.V. A woman with a bicycle, near a dumpster, was expecting him. The man unloaded numerous boxes of Miracle Brands hand sanitizer onto the pavement. He and the woman dismantled the packages, looking for something, then abandoned them to cut up and share a piece of fruit. "Tweaker behavior," Eberhart said, peering at them through binoculars. The boxes may well have been boosted, but they fell outside the night's assignment.

Eberhart slid his laptop off his dashboard and showed me evidence photographs of devices that thieves and

fences use to evade electronic scanners (aluminum-lined shopping bags) and unfasten sensors (talonlike skeleton keys). In a video, we watched a man blowtorch open a plexiglass lockbox at a Walgreens. "The tools are constantly evolving," Eberhart said. The unit's case files show enormous quantities of recovered goods—Delta faucets, an unsettling amount of Secret deodorant. There were golf clubs and guitars and, somehow, furnaces. When Eberhart came to a photograph of paving stones, he told me about a man who was accused of remodelling an entire house and a restaurant through a long gambit involving unchecked receipts, pickup counters, cancelled orders, and extreme gall. The C.H.P. investigation, he said, had turned up Ring security cameras, kitchen cabinets, countertops, AstroTurf, dining-room chairs, paint, lumber, even "big bags of charcoal."

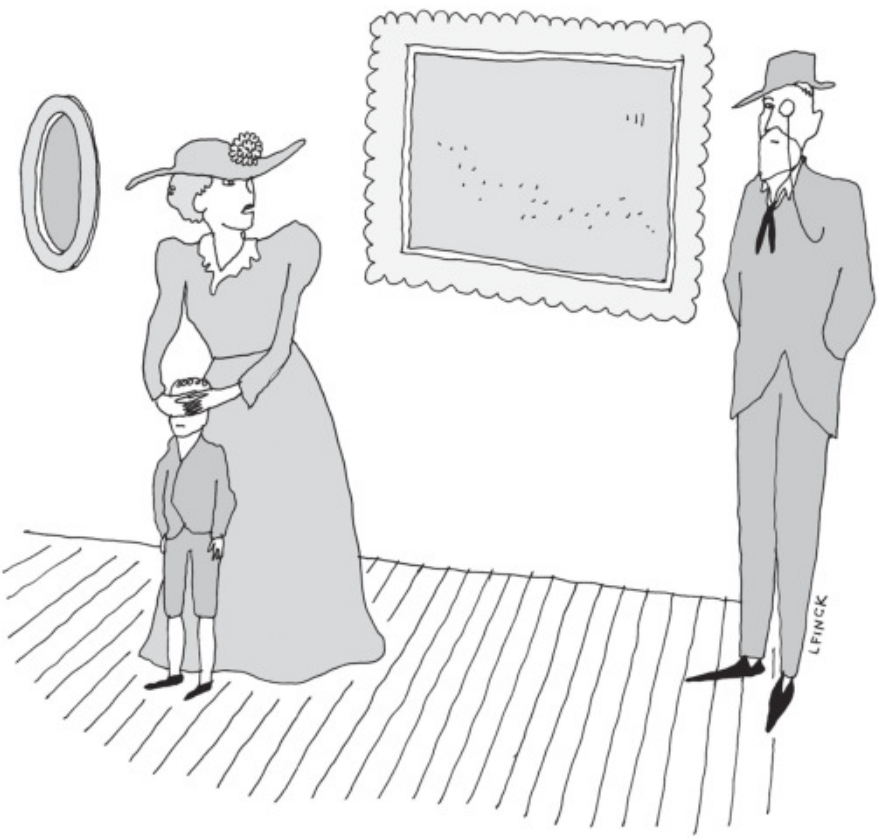
Up popped photographs of a discount wholesaler called CostLess, followed by an article from the *Orange County Register*. In 2021, the newspaper reported that Facebook users had read about CostLess's grand opening and "couldn't wait to get inside." The store advertised overstock merchandise at up to eighty per cent off: Sketchers for fifteen dollars, Uggs for seventy-nine. During the pandemic, the newspaper reported, CostLess's "inventory of pantry goods and cleaning supplies became an alternative when traditional stores sold out." An employee bragged that the owner "refused to charge more for pandemic items such as Lysol spray and Clorox, even when he lost money."

The store became part of a broader investigation involving more than fifty million dollars' worth of boosted freight, including Samsung and Sony televisions. The ring behind these thefts allegedly stole five to seven tractor trailers per week, sometimes by posing as truck drivers. Investigators impounded half a million dollars in cash, thirteen gold bars, and numerous illegal firearms. Forty people were arrested. (Charges are pending in many of the cases in this article.) As Eberhart showed me the photographs, he marvelled at one-dollar energy drinks and ten-dollar packages of pistachios, which, "even at Costco," sell for more than double that amount. "It's crazy," he said.

On the afternoon of September 2, 2022, a man walked into a Macy's in Valencia and asked to see a gold chain. A clerk behind a glass case pulled out a piece that cost more than forty-two hundred dollars. The customer snatched the necklace from her hand and ran. About an hour later, he showed up at a Macy's in Redondo Beach and did the same thing, taking a chain worth more than two thousand dollars. Over the next few days, he robbed Macy's stores in Lakewood, Montebello, and Santa Ana, stealing chains that, collectively, were worth nearly twenty thousand dollars.

In each instance, the thief wore a face mask, a baseball cap, a white tank top, and dark basketball shorts trimmed in white. In later heists, his outfit included red-and-black shorts; a long-sleeved shirt that snugly fit his athletic frame; and a series of caps, including one emblazoned with "Positive State of Mind." At one jewelry counter, he admired himself in a mirror before sprinting out wearing a chain that the clerk had made the mistake of fastening around his neck.

The man always ran to the passenger side of a getaway car—a silver Lexus sedan with distinctive dents on the back right bumper and near the driver's door. The presence of an accomplice qualified the thefts as organized retail crime, as did the possibility that the jewelry was going to a fence. As is typical, the suspects were engaged in multiple types of offenses. The getaway car once waited in a handicapped zone, then sped off the wrong direction down a one-way street. On Halloween, 2022, it struck a sheriff's deputy who had been chasing the suspect on foot, injuring the officer's leg and arm; the car "made no attempt to go around" him, according to a deputy who witnessed the hit-and-run. The crimes also involved fraud, as the jewelry thief presented fake I.D., including a Tennessee driver's license and a California medical-marijuana card belonging to other men. And there was destruction of property: the thief broke one chain in half during an



"We're not introducing modernism till he's ten."

altercation with a clerk. His behavior suggested that he did not mind overpowering others in order to get what he wanted. After he hit three stores in one day, Kay Jewelers notified employees, "DO NOT attempt to chase or physically engage the suspect."

The man's most distinctive physical feature was his array of tattoos—"Karen" over his left eyebrow, a red crown on his neck. Store employees remembered seeing a cross tattoo on his left arm, and, on the inside of his wrists, an umbrella and a spider. The organized-retail-crime unit called him the Karen Bandit.

By November, the bandit had stolen forty thousand dollars' worth of jewelry from Macy's and another eighty thousand dollars' worth from JCPenney. The case involved police reports, witness statements, forensic evidence, voluminous security footage, and surveillance. The lead detective on the case, Scott Elson, found that the bandit was covering his tracks with another form of fraud: someone was "cold-plating" the Lexus by using a license plate registered to another vehicle.

Detectives traced the bandit to a one-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles, and two of the stolen gold chains to a local pawnshop. They also had a suspect for the getaway car. In the pawnshop's sales records, Elson noticed what he thought was an error: the suspected driver's name was supposed to be spelled with an "a," not an "e." Then he saw the notation "twin brother." He was dealing with *two* potential accomplices with virtually the same name—and the exact same DNA. In driver's-license photographs, the twins shared the same goatee, ear piercings, and haircut. Elson couldn't get enough on the brothers to charge them, but the Karen Bandit pleaded guilty, and is serving eight years in prison. To Eberhart, the surprise twist in the roster of potential coconspirators underscored the shape-shifting nature of organized retail crime. He explained, "It's never one thing."

Retailers are insured against losses, but they and law-enforcement officers like to point out that organized retail crime is not "victimless." To start, there are humans on the other end of hostile encounters. In the Karen Bandit case, numerous employees—Vanessa, Renee, Monica, Miriam, Nathan, Hannah, Ana, Valerie—had to weigh the risk of injury, or unemployment, or worse, against the act of showing a customer a nice necklace. The N.R.F. recently reported that eight out of ten U.S. retailers say that thieves have become more aggressive and violent. In one shocking case, in Hillsborough, North Carolina, a man pushing a cartload of power washers out of a Home Depot shoved an eighty-two-year-old employee to the concrete floor without breaking stride. The clerk, Gary Rasor, died of complications from the fall, and the state medical examiner ruled his death a homicide. Reportedly, Rasor had merely asked for a receipt.

Last year, at a Home Depot near San Francisco, Blake Mohs, an L.P. who hoped to become a police officer, confronted a woman about an item taken from the power-tools department. She pulled a gun from her purse and shot him in the chest. (She later claimed that it went off by accident.) Mohs's colleagues wore their orange work aprons to his funeral. His mother, Lorie, testifying at a congressional hearing, blamed the criminal-justice system, Home Depot, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, alleging that the agency had "failed to make safety a priority" for L.P.s.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than fifteen million people work in the retail sector. The N.R.F. says that retail supports fifty-two million American jobs. If retailers hope to recruit and retain good employees, they must first keep them safe. Companies have started to use security robots that relay alerts to guards, and systems for "advanced weapon detection." During blitzes, Eberhart and his officers often find handguns tucked into suspects' waistbands.

Retailers also want to improve their "analytic and investigative skills," according to the N.R.F. When I asked Duryee, the C.H.P. commissioner, whether he worries that law enforcement's collaboration with private industry will create a class of para-police retail workers, he said no, and told me that employees are given "rules of engagement." He said, "There's no commodity—we don't care *how* much it's worth—that's worth a human life."

On store shelves today, even the Ensure is locked up, along with toothbrushes and socks. During the Home Depot blitz, one man forced open a cage housing Milwaukee power tools. Rodriguez radioed for somebody to "get eyes." Cap replied, "Yeah, I'm on him." That fellow ended up walking out empty-handed, as did a man who ditched a full cart near the entrance. Eberhart and I watched him beat it in a gold Mitsubishi. "Got spooked," someone said.

Just before closing, an older man arrived in a khaki jacket and a nice plaid shirt, looking like he might have come from a Lakers game. The L.P.s recognized him as a booster who liked to taunt employees, knowing that they are not allowed to stop him from stealing. When the man pushed a cart with large boxes through the front door, a detective radioed, "Good for a takedown."

Outside, the man was handcuffed and told to stay put. "Where'm I gonna go?" he huffed. A check of his fingerprints showed that he was wanted on more than two hundred thousand dollars' worth of warrants, for charges ranging from petty theft to making criminal threats. An L.P. walked over to Eberhart and said, "Today I would call a good day." Back in the Ram, Eberhart told me, "That's why it's such a nice thing, to have these asset-protection people. They know their clientele. They know their habitual offenders."

The blitz ultimately ensnared survival shoplifters and organized-retail-crime suspects in nearly equal measure. A fellow in a "McLovin" T-shirt was caught with two cans of Behr paint and multiple bottles of Green Gobbler Drain Clog Dissolver. A wiry older man just shook his head when found taking toilet paper, laundry detergent, and paper towels. Petty larceny did not interest the detectives, but, as Eberhart put it, "A misdemeanor is a misdemeanor, a theft is a theft. You can't pick and choose what you want to enforce." The impounded evidence included an illegal fixed-blade knife, found in the right front pocket of a young man who had arrived on a Razor scooter. Later, at the operation's debriefing, Probart told the squad, "Only one guy with a weapon this time." ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

THE AFFAIR WITH MY CHAIR

BY ALYSSA BRANDT

I've heard people call sitting the new smoking. Others say that sitting is the new sugar. Both wrong. I'm here to tell you that sitting is the new sex. It feels so good, especially with the right partner.

What started as a short fling to ride out a global pandemic became something more. Being confined together for months can test a couple, but the experience deepened our bond. I fell in love. I can't speak for my desk chair from the office—well, maybe I can, since chairs don't talk—but I feel like I know its heart.

Chair-a-la is the pet name I've been using. Sometimes Chair-Chair. Or Chairy-boo (but only in private). Chair-a-la hasn't reciprocated, but that's O.K. Call me superficial, but I'll take three-hundred-and-sixty-degree arms, adjustable lumbar support, variable seat height and depth, and soil-resistant leather over a lot of empty talk. Words don't fully convey how reassuring and delicious it feels to be truly held by an inanimate object.

Before Chair-a-la and I got together, I played the field. Once, I met a handsome and elegant bentwood chair at a chic James Beard-nominated restaurant, only to realize, halfway through the house-made country-style pâté, that this clown wasn't really interested in me, the whole me. Hard, mean, unyielding—you know the type, so I won't bore you with the laundry list of red flags I noticed that night. I also got stuck with the check, of course, but it was a small price to pay to avoid getting stuck with the wrong chair! You know what they say about kissing a few frogs.

Friends warned me that I was looking for a unicorn: supportive but not obsequious; flexible but not in a showoffy way, like that woman at yoga who just preens through her pigeon pose. Then I realized—just like in the movies!—that my true soul mate, the one I had been looking for, was right next door. Like, literally next door. In the next cubicle. Just like my office chair, but the upgraded model, with the headrest, and without the stain from that turmeric bubble tea that Judy in accounting insisted I try. Yes, I stole for love! I took it home, and the rest, well, you know what they say.

We never said we were going to be exclusive, but my other chairs quickly noticed the favoritism. What did they do? They did nothing. That was the problem. They just sat there, silent and unmoving. I had been with some of these chairs for years. Years! Had our relationships been purely transactional? The thought was humiliating. I was not going to be made a fool of in my own home. I kicked them out. All of them. Kicked them right to the curb, where they remain, because apparently you have to call for a stupid "heavy item" pickup from the Sanitation Department, and I will not lift another finger for those losers. They can rot, for all I care. If the notes that my neighbors keep leaving in my mailbox are to be believed, the chairs are indeed miserable and sad—and wet and beginning to smell bad and attract raccoons. So ha ha ha!

Nearly four years later, Chair-a-la and I are still together. Working together. Eating together. Bingeing "Suits" together. It's a lot of togethering. I never saw myself as a swinger, but it might be time to bring a standing desk into the relationship. ♦

PROFILES

A CLASS OF HER OWN

Quinta Brunson was a devoted student of the sitcom long before she created "Abbott Elementary."

BY MOLLY FISCHER

With a half-hour mockumentary-style comedy about teachers at a majority-Black public school in Philadelphia, Brunson

created an old-fashioned, mainstream hit. "Quinta hacked network TV," the comedian and actor Ramy Youssef said.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AB+DM

In mid-January, two days after Quinta Brunson accepted the Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series for her starring role on the ABC show "Abbott Elementary," she was in a hair-and-makeup trailer on the Warner Bros. lot at 7 A.M. "I actually was a little late this morning, which I hate, but a pipe burst in my house," she said. Her voice was still hoarse from a weekend that also included several galas and the Critics Choice Awards. At the Emmys, the television luminary Carol Burnett had presented Brunson with her trophy—she was the first Black woman in more than forty years to win the category. Onstage, Brunson had worn a pink crushed-satin Dior dress with a nineteen-fifties-prom-queen silhouette and proclaimed her love for her family, her show, and her medium. "I don't even know why I'm so emotional," she said through tears. "I think, like, the Carol Burnett of it all."

In the trailer, Brunson sat before a mirror in a loose navy sweater, a Dior-logo print scarf over her hair. Lisa Peña-Wong, a nail technician, was in the process of swapping out Brunson's glittery awards manicure for a simpler look—something more befitting Janine Teagues, her character on "Abbott," an eager-beaver second-grade teacher who's still finding her personal and professional footing. Brunson has a connoisseur's appreciation for sitcoms, and for the constrained pleasures of a fictional world that stays nearly the same week after week. "Small growth is important, especially in TV, especially if that TV's going to last a long time," she told me from her makeup chair. First-season Janine did not get her nails done; third-season Janine does. "I think it's what people are secretly signing up for," she said.

Brunson is also the creator of "Abbott," one of its executive producers and showrunners, and the leader of its writers' room, all of which means that she has the final word on everything from costumes to punch lines. At the moment, a MacBook was propped on her lap, so that she could review an upcoming episode's cold open. "The minute we call cut, somebody's throwing a laptop in front of her," one of her co-stars, Chris Perfetti, told me. "It's astounding how much of the show is held in her brain at one time."

"Abbott Elementary" arrived in December, 2021, as a midseason addition to ABC's lineup: a half-hour mockumentary-style comedy about teachers at a majority-Black public school in West Philadelphia who are doing their best with the little they've got. The first episode finds Janine introducing herself to an unseen camera crew at the start of her second year on the job, wearing a nameplate necklace that reads "kindness" and a default expression of radiant, anxious positivity. Two years counts as an achievement, she explains, because most teachers burn out after one. Her young colleagues include Gregory Eddie (Tyler James Williams), a handsome and taciturn substitute teacher with a sense of self-discipline verging on the eccentric, and Jacob Hill (Perfetti), the kind of white ally who talks about how he applied to Morehouse. The veterans on hand to advise them are Melissa Schemmenti (Lisa Ann Walter), a genially mobbed-up South Philly divorcée, and Barbara Howard (Sheryl Lee Ralph), a regal, God-fearing kindergarten teacher loosely based on Brunson's mother, who taught in the Philadelphia public-school system for thirty years.

In its first season, "Abbott" set records at ABC for viewership across broadcast and digital platforms. From the beginning, the show had a distinctive mix: it was idiosyncratic but accessible, familiar but fresh, warm but not sweaty. Its success was seen as a sign of hope for an old-school model of TV. *GQ* credited Brunson, a comic and writer who came up on the Internet, with having "saved the sitcom"; the Los Angeles *Times* wondered whether she could "save broadcast TV." Cute scholastic accolades abounded: "Somebody put a shiny, red apple on Quinta Brunson's desk, because her 'Abbott Elementary' is schooling the competition," a story in *TheWrap* read. In a landscape of quirky streaming projects and auteur dramedies, Brunson had achieved the unlikely—an old-fashioned, mainstream hit.

Donald Glover, a friend of Brunson's and the creator of the experimental FX comedy "Atlanta," said that "Abbott" made him jealous. "I always get in my way about making a simple, good sandwich," he told me. "I complicate things." Brunson's show was a reminder of the satisfactions of saying, as Glover put it, "I'm just going to make a good-ass hamburger." ABC signed "Abbott" up for a full second season of twenty-two episodes, which went on to average a noteworthy 9.1 million viewers each; the third season premièred this February. In 2023, the show's art department rebuilt the school's façade, replacing Vacuform plastic panels with an actual brick edifice on the studio lot, not far from the fountain featured in the opening credits of "Friends." "It's something I've always wanted to do," the production designer, Michael Whetstone, told me, laughing. "But you have to do it on a show that you think is going to be around long enough to warrant it."

Last summer, Brunson texted Moira Frazier, the head of "Abbott"'s hair department, to say that her character should have a middle part this season. "In Black culture, there's a thing called a bust-down middle part, and I just associate it with being a bad bitch," Brunson said. "When I have a middle part, I feel like more of a boss than when I have my side part. This middle part, for Janine—it's big." In the trailer, Frazier situated Brunson's wig and studied the result. Getting the middle part perfectly centered required vigilance.

Increased scrutiny, often with an almost possessive undertone, has become part of Brunson's daily life. Her crushed-satin Emmys dress, for example, prompted a contingent of online observers to fret that she'd neglected to iron it. "I wanted to wear that dress," Brunson told me, frustrated but also wary of seeming to complain about the hassles of success. "I'm not a hot girl who's going to wear a hot outfit. I just want to show up in a dress I like that is comfortable for me, because I don't want you to come to me for the outfits I wear. I don't want you to come to me for being pretty, even, or anything other than a good writer."

We took a short walk from the trailer to the "Abbott" soundstage—for longer distances, Brunson drives a yellow golf cart labelled "Q-BABY." When we arrived, she was greeted by cheers and applause from her cast and crew. " 'The Bear' is *not* a comedy!" someone yelled. (The FX show about a Chicago restaurant had beaten out "Abbott" for Best Comedy Series at the Emmys.) People were gathered in a staged school hallway

"Comedy—it's wack to say, but it is kind of a religion," she said. "It was, like, 'This is it for me. This is what I believe in.'"

"I thought cats were supposed to be aloof."

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lined with bulletin boards and glass-fronted display cases, one of which held a papier-mâché bust of Barack Obama. Brunson addressed the crowd briefly, saying that her Emmy had been "a win for the entire show." She had the air of a team captain whose mind was already half on the next game. Afterward, she went to her dressing room, where a production assistant had left her a bag of Chester's Flamin' Hot Fries, with "Congrats!" scrawled across it in Sharpie.

Until recently, Brunson had a dressing room the same size as those of her co-stars, but this season she accepted the need for a larger one; she uses the space as an office, and sometimes all the writers squeeze in with her. The room was dotted with souvenir pictures of her with friends and colleagues at Smoke House, an old-Hollywood restaurant near the Warner Bros. lot. She finds it impossible to resist the photos that staff take of guests and then sell back to them for ten dollars. "To me," she said, "this is one of the advantages of having money."

She pulled a bow-tied pink Zara blouse and a pencil skirt from a rack. "Sitcoms, over the last twenty years or so, became a little bit more wish fulfillment, a little bit more glam," she told me. Viewers tuned in to "black-ish" eager to see what Tracee Ellis Ross's character would wear. Brunson saw the appeal, but, because "Abbott" depicts public-school employees, it was important to her that the characters dress with a degree of realism. "For Janine in particular, a girl who has a lot on her plate, and is ambitious," she said, "knowing how to look exactly right is not the first thing on her mind." Janine's efforts at flair—bright patterns, chunky accessories—often fall flat. "I thought about myself much younger," Brunson, who is thirty-four, said. "The things I wore in college were absolutely insane." Brunson liked that the pink blouse looked a little prim, because in that day's episode Janine, newly promoted, was being sneaky, meddling in the affairs of a substitute she mistrusts—minor high jinks on the periphery of the episode's main A and B plotlines. "Sometimes I think C stories are the best stories," she said. She occasionally tries to pitch an alternative: "What about, in this episode, if Janine's *not* in it?"

Back on set, she and Lisa Ann Walter were shooting a scene of post-high-jinks contrition in Melissa Schemmenti's classroom. Brunson's position demands diplomacy—if she has comments on a scene partner's performance, she'll pass them to the director rather than deliver them herself. After a few takes, the episode's director, Jen Celotta, one of several veterans of "The Office" who have worked on the show, sounded almost apologetic for not having more notes. With Brunson out of earshot, Brittani Nichols, the episode's writer, explained to me that they were stalling for time. A surprise delivery was on its way for Brunson, and they wanted to keep her busy until it arrived.

The "Abbott Elementary" set is supposed to seem as though it has survived decades of hard use: linoleum floors are scuffed; acoustic ceiling tiles are warped and water-stained. When the surprise delivery appeared, it looked like an arrival from another planet. It was also roughly the size of a planet: a dome-shaped arrangement, some four feet in diameter, of pink roses, hyacinths, and peonies, rolling down the hallway toward Brunson on a pallet steered by two crew members. "It's bigger than you," someone said, amid general clapping and laughter. "It's literally bigger than me," Brunson, who is four feet eleven, said. Her colleagues began to sing "Happy Emmys to You." She opened the card. "From Oprah," she read. "Dear Quinta, And still you rise, and make history. Oprah Winfrey." Brunson posed for a picture standing behind the flowers, only her smiling face and her middle part peeking over the top.

Shooting was finished by 11:30 A.M.

"I never wrap this early," Brunson said. Later, she told me she was a little sorry that my time with her in the days that followed the Emmys had been unrepresentative. These were "very, very, very, very easy, light days," she said. I mentioned her assessment to Tyler James Williams, her co-star and friend. The whole cast had been exhausted and running on adrenaline, he told me. Calling it easy? "See, that's the flex," he said.

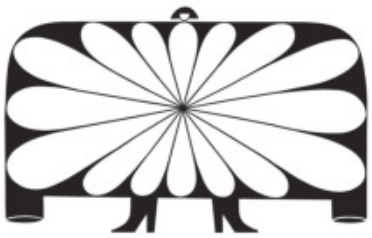
The bouquet, once photographed, became a conundrum. "I don't know what I'm going to do with this—bring it home?" Brunson wondered aloud. (She lives in the San Fernando Valley with her husband, Kevin Jay Anik, who works in California's legal-cannabis industry.) In the end, she had it moved to the "Abbott" production offices, where it loomed over that afternoon's table read. Afterward, cast and crew members plucked flowers to take home, and by the next day all that remained were a few blocks of green florist's foam.

"Abbott Elementary" débuted at a moment when teachers and their work were the subject of politicized debate. COVID closures had brought new attention to the role of public schools; the right-wing group Moms for Liberty was just starting to agitate against classroom discussions of race, gender, and sexuality. The show didn't address such topics directly—there was no talk of, say, mask mandates or book bans. Yet, by situating the action in the present and taking up the ordinary daily challenges of teaching, "Abbott" presented an implicit argument for the profession's significance, and its dignity. The month the series premièred, a video shot at a South Dakota hockey arena went viral: it showed teachers on their hands and knees scrambling for dollar bills to buy school supplies. In a culture that produced such spectacles, "Abbott" offered a humanizing perspective.

Still, success has come with an expectation that the show will speak on behalf of teachers, or dramatize such charged public issues as school shootings. "I've loved Spider-Man since I was a little girl, but I've started to love him even more lately because I get it," Brunson told me, referring to the superhero's attempt at early retirement. "Back in the day, I was, like, 'Why is he dumping the suit?' *I get it.* You have to carry New York on your back and you did not sign up for that." Representation can mean that people claim you as their representative. "Especially being a Black woman, you carry a lot of responsibility," she said. "With that responsibility, I still need to be able to do what I want to do."

She has known what she wanted to do with "Abbott" from the beginning. In the pilot, one of Janine's students pees on her classroom's story-time rug, rendering it unusable—a problem that is ultimately solved because Melissa knows a guy working on the Philadelphia Eagles' stadium renovation, who snags discarded team-logo rugs for all the teachers. ("I hate to be corny and 'Sex and the City' about it, but Philly totally is a character in the show," Brunson told an audience recently.) Midway through the episode, there's a scene in which Janine and Gregory meet in a bathroom and contend with a malfunctioning toilet. Justin Halpern, an executive producer and showrunner on "Abbott," remembers saying to Brunson that he thought the scene could be cut for time. "And she was, like, 'I think this is going to be one of the most important scenes in the script,'" he told me. Audience testing proved her point: viewers loved the interaction, which showed the beginning of Gregory and Janine's slow-building attraction. "She was a thousand per cent right," Halpern said. The episode won Brunson her first Emmy, for writing.

Erin Wehrenberg runs comedy programming at ABC, and she recalls being particularly struck, when Brunson first



pitched the show, by the "very moving" relationship between Brunson's character and Barbara, whom Janine idolizes and strives to enlist as a mentor. "It was really evident that Barbara was her mom now and Janine was her mom young," Wehrenberg said. Brunson herself understands the correspondences more broadly. "Six different characters on 'Abbott' are six different ways of showing people who I am," she told me.

Abbott's principal, Ava Coleman (Janelle James), is a wily narcissist who blackmailed her way into the job and keeps a ring light in her office for TikTok shoots. Ava is also the show's resident insult comic, and Janine is her preferred target. Ava makes fun of Janine's height; she makes fun of her clothes; she calls her Lori Leftfoot when they co-lead a step class. In one episode, Ava comes upon Janine pacing and absent-mindedly clapping her hands. "You psyching yourself up to be yourself today?" Ava asks. Especially at the beginning, "the meanest jokes about Janine in the show were written by Quinta," Halpern told me.

When "Abbott Elementary" premièred, broadcast comedy looked like unpromising terrain. Audiences still showed up for the networks' talent shows and procedurals, but the entertainment Zeitgeist was drifting away from traditional prime time. An ambitious young comedian circa 2021 was more likely to aspire to the creative freedom offered by cable or a streaming platform, where a showrunner could make an eight-episode season replete with swearing and formal experimentation, find a niche audience, and be praised as "revolutionary," or at least "edgy." But the network sitcom—even as the staginess of classic multi-camera shows had given way to more dynamic single-camera productions—remained a rule-bound form, a twenty-two-minute sestina, with fixed beats and commercial breaks.

Brunson was a dedicated student of the genre. "I watch everything," she told me, by which she meant everything from "The Andy Griffith Show" to "That's So Raven." She has an encyclopedic knowledge—she knows the pilot of "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air" by heart—gleaned from endless rewatching. Larry Wilmore is something like the dean of Black comedy writers in TV, a force behind such influential shows as "In Living Color" and also a mentor to Issa Rae and Robin Thede. "I worked on 'The Office,'" Wilmore told me. "But Quinta knows it better than I do." Brunson had made plans to meet Norman Lear, arguably the architect of the modern sitcom, before he died, last December, and she spoke wistfully of missing her chance. "My biggest influences are

Her taste and instincts defined the show from the start. "I think the one thing she may have acquiesced to on the pilot is being

network TV," she said. "When a new network show comes out, I'm on the couch, hoping that it's good. Often being disappointed. But I want it to be good."

The old-fashioned sitcom offers viewers the illusion of a place where everybody knows your name, and the comfort of an onscreen camaraderie that deepens over time. This comfort has to feel easy, but it is not, in fact, easy to achieve. Brunson was inspired by such predecessors as "Parks and Recreation" and "The Office," combining their mockumentary structure with a flood of Internet-friendly pop-culture references. It took a full season of "Parks"—also a workplace show with a perky protagonist—for viewers to figure out how they were supposed to relate to its main character, Leslie Knope. Janine's exasperating lovability, by contrast, was clear immediately.

Sitcoms set in schools ("The Facts of Life," "Saved by the Bell") have tended to focus on students' antics—"Welcome Back, Kotter" may have been named for a teacher, but its breakout star was John Travolta, who played a teen-age lunkhead. More recently, comedies centering on teachers, such as the short-lived NBC series "AP Bio" or the film "Bad Teacher," found sour humor in their distaste for the job. Yet, in Brunson's experience, teachers loved what they did. In 2018, she was a young TV writer in L.A., visiting home and hanging around her mother's classroom, when the idea for "Abbott Elementary" came to her: a workplace comedy set in a school. Originally, Brunson called her show "Harrity Elementary," for the place where her mother worked.

The denizens of "Abbott Elementary"

the star," one producer said.

have sitcom problems (misguided plans, embarrassing secrets) that find sitcom resolutions (humbling failures, lessons in empathy). But their world is anchored in the realities of public-school teaching, which give the show its texture and its stakes. "Abbott" depicts the ingenuity required to face a perpetual lack of funding and an intransigent bureaucracy, along with the unforeseen challenges presented by a roomful of kids. ("That's what happens when you enforce a no-nose-picking policy," one teacher, wised up, tells another.) The basic human question of "Abbott," Brunson told me, is "Can these people move this rock up this hill?"

This could skew high-minded or overly earnest were it not for Brunson's deep appreciation of the juvenile. She has absolute clarity about what she finds funny, which includes the critically reviled 2015 Will Ferrell vehicle "Daddy's Home." (She briefly fantasized about remaking it as "Mommy's Home," before being dissuaded. A friend's verdict: "Aim for the stars, Quinta, before you aim for the ground.") She has a soft spot for the entire Ferrell œuvre; one of the scenes I watched her film with Walter had blocking inspired by "Anchorman." Such movies represent a golden era of cinematic stupidity, and "stupid" is high praise on the "Abbott" set. After all, "stupid" physical comedy stretches back to such predecessors as the Three Stooges and Buster Keaton, a legacy Brunson came to appreciate as a young comedy nerd. (She also took a clown class in college.) "She's not afraid to let us run for the stupidest jokes ever," Williams said, admiringly. Randall Einhorn, an executive producer and a frequent director on "Abbott," told me, "One of my goals is to have Quinta say to me, 'Randall, that is *so stupid*. Let's do that.'"

Her taste has always defined the show. During the development process, Brunson was willing to say no to changes that ran counter to it. "I think the one thing she may have acquiesced to on the pilot is being the star," Patrick Schumacker, an executive producer and showrunner on "Abbott," said. "She initially wanted the show to be about Barbara."

Brunson grew up in West Philadelphia, the youngest of five, and early on her much older siblings gave her entrée into the world of big-kid pop culture. Her sister Njia told Seth Rogen, on his podcast, that she remembers Brunson riding in her car seat, doing an impression of the Jamie Foxx character Wanda from "In Living Color." Brunson quickly found that she could make her whole family laugh by imitating bits from the nineties sitcom "Martin."

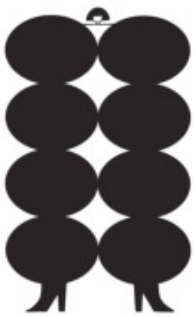
Brunson describes her parents, Rick and Norma Jean, as "searchers"—in their younger days, they'd been involved with the Black Power movement. They'd also been performers: her father was a gymnast, and her mother was a modern dancer. By the time Brunson arrived, though, they had become Jehovah's Witnesses; while she was growing up, her mother taught kindergarten and her father managed parking lots. Brunson attended a formative elementary-school program focussed on Black history called Ahali, which was situated on the top floor of the building where her mother taught. She was an energetic child, so her mother signed her up for acrobatics and ballet classes. She liked both, but her early encounters with "Martin" and "In Living Color" had stuck. "Comedy—it's wack to say, but it is kind of a religion," Brunson, who left her parents' faith at twenty-one, told me. "I didn't want to admit it to myself, but it was, like, 'This is it for me. This is what I believe in.'"

She was hesitant to tell anyone. "It was a farfetched dream for a little girl from West Philly, especially when most of my friends were planning on becoming nurses or teachers," she writes in her 2021 essay collection, "She Memes Well." "Even though all of my comedy heroes were white guys at the time, I still wanted to be exactly like them." Her friends didn't always share her interests, but she was popular, and she had confidence in her instincts. "My first venture in *taste* was 'Napoleon Dynamite,'" Brunson told me. She was fourteen when the movie was released, in 2004, and she left the theatre eager to proselytize. Her friends and classmates at the Charter High School of Architecture and Design were unmoved. "Finally, the DVD came out," she said. "I brought the DVD into school and was, like, 'This is what I'm trying to tell you all about.'" With a good student's bravado, she persuaded her teacher to let the class watch it, and her classmates were converted. "I remember that being a moment for me," Brunson said. "Being, like, '*I know comedy.*'"

A career in show business was considered too "worldly" by her parents—her mother pressed her to consider a more useful field, such as teaching—so Brunson enrolled in the communications program at Temple University, while continuing to live at home. Her family had always been close, but she began to feel the strain of her parents' faith and expectations. "I remember intense fights with my mom," Brunson said. "You could write a scene out of them. Like, did Greta Gerwig produce this fight?" She'd begun

sneaking around to attend improv rehearsals, or to hang out in friends' dorm rooms watching the radically strange Adult Swim sketch series "Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!"

"When I was young and in it, I didn't know what we were fighting about," Brunson said, of her relationship with her mother. "When I got older, I realized this was a person who'd lost a lot and didn't want me to lose anything." Brunson now sees her mother's embrace of a faith with strict prohibitions on drugs as a way of seeking safety. At the time, though, the objections to her goals were baffling. "I didn't understand! You're the person who put me in dance classes—why are you mad?" They watched a lot of "King of Queens" together. "It felt like the only time we got on the same page was through TV," Brunson told me. (Recently, she sent her mother a selfie from the award circuit with Jane Seymour, a.k.a. Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman.)



Brunson, taking a methodical approach to her ambitions, read Tina Fey's memoir, "Bossypants," and researched the career paths of comedians who wound up on "Saturday Night Live." Everyone seemed to have passed through Second City, the Chicago comedy institution. Brunson used her savings to fly out for a weeklong improv course and lied to her parents about where she was. After the class's final performance, the teacher pulled her aside and told her she ought to take Second City's sketch-writing course; when Brunson said that she'd spent all her money on the first class, the teacher gave her five hundred dollars to cover the cost. Back in Philadelphia, she left school, took a job at an Apple Store, and began saving money to move to L.A. In 2013, she got a transfer from the Apple Store at the King of Prussia Mall to the one in Century City. She didn't tell her parents she was going to California until after she'd bought the ticket. As she'd expected, they disapproved; for a time, she held out the possibility of finishing her degree there to reassure them.

Arriving in L.A. as a twenty-three-year-old, Brunson lived cheaply ("Bananas and Cup Noodles for breakfast, lunch, and dinner," she said) and joined an improv group. She was still working at the Apple Store when a friend at the legendary West Hollywood venue the Comedy Store asked her if she'd be interested in performing there. The catch was that she would be up the following night. Brunson, undeterred, immediately began to recruit a lineup of sketch-comedy collaborators.

Kate Peterman, who went to college with Brunson and is now a writer on "Abbott," was one of the friends Brunson texted, and she remembers the group arriving at the Comedy Store the next day. They assumed they'd be performing in the Belly Room, a small space upstairs, but no: they would be on the main stage. "Everyone got really, really nervous except Quinta," Peterman said. Calmly, Brunson began making logistical requests. "It wasn't mean or bossy," Peterman said. "It was so direct—knowing exactly what needed to happen." It was revelatory to see her friend in charge. "She was running the show from the beginning."

That night was the first time Brunson did a character she called the Girl Who's Never Been on a Nice Date. The crowd was predominantly Black, which was important to her. "Black audiences are the hardest to make laugh," she writes in "She Memes Well." "If they didn't like it, I had nothing." They loved it. Brunson's friends urged her to make a video sketch featuring the character. Over the next couple of months, the Girl Who's Never Been on a Nice Date became the subject of a series of clips shot with friends and shared on Instagram. In one fifteen-second video, the Girl waits at a movie concession stand alongside a man. Skittles, Reese's Pieces, pretzels—Brunson's face registers each new snack he buys as a scarcely believable extravagance. Finally, the date orders a large popcorn. Her eyes pop like those of a cartoon character who's just seen an especially tasty pie. "A *large*?" Brunson says. "You got money—he got money! Get it all for him!" Brunson's amazed expression and the phrase "He got money" soon took on new life as a reaction GIF. (The skit has followed her: after the Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts had a cameo in the Season 3 première, one fan tweeted, "Abbott Elementary got money money!")

In 2014, finding an unfamous stranger's funny post on Instagram took work—the app was not set up to encourage virality. But Brunson's follower count went from about a thousand to more than thirty thousand, and kept growing. Suddenly, she was navigating the economy of social-media celebrity. She could get paid to appear in character at events, which was lucrative but also, she eventually decided, "awkward and soul-crushing." She could sell branded merchandise, but, ultimately, she did not want to be in the T-shirt business. Soon, she was getting spots in standup shows that she wouldn't have had a chance at otherwise. She was conscious of her own inexperience. "Standup is a craft and a community and an art form," she told me. "A lot of these Internet people would get up there and bomb." She was realizing that she liked creating characters and collaborating more than she liked standing alone in front of an audience and talking about herself; standup, she said, was "not my method of storytelling." When a friend of hers named Justin Tan asked her to eat Doritos in a video for BuzzFeed, where he had a fellowship, Brunson said yes.

"International Doritos Taste Test" wasn't much as a piece of comedy. But in 2014 BuzzFeed was flush with venture capital and positioning itself as the digital future of media. Brunson talked her way into a fellowship, too, and soon she and Tan were making sketch-comedy videos for the site. Each video had a budget of around three hundred dollars and offered, within certain tight parameters, "a hundred per cent creative control," Tan said. "We would write it one day, shoot it the next day, edit it the third day, and it'd be online and be seen by millions of people." One of their earliest collaborations was the 2014 video "If Everyone Acted Like the Real Housewives," in which minor office conversations about forwarded e-mails and borrowed staplers degenerate into screaming, tears, and hurled drinks. Their 2015 clip "Wedding Season Is Coming" is shot in the style of a horror-movie trailer. BuzzFeed's emphasis on relatable content made it a proving ground for the kind of mass appeal required in broadcast TV. "The Internet ate her up," Tan, who is now a writer and director on "Abbott," said.

At BuzzFeed, Brunson would casually walk into a boss's office and ask to chat, according to Peterman, who worked there, too. In part, this was the preternatural self-assurance of a woman who would later bond with Oprah Winfrey over never having experienced impostor syndrome. But to Peterman it also illustrated Brunson's basic view of the world: "She has never looked at people as anything other than exactly equal. There is no pity. There is no idolizing. Everyone is on the same level." Donald Glover, who was raised as a Jehovah's Witness as well, observed that, among former members of the denomination, "there's an innocence that never goes away." He added, "I don't think she sees the barriers."

Her time at BuzzFeed coincided with online publishers' brief pivot to video—the boom period in the mid-twenty-tens when outlets pumped resources into short-form content they believed would find audiences (and satisfy advertisers). Brunson signed a two-year contract with the company, and began pitching scripted series to nascent Web platforms. "Broke," for YouTube Red, followed a trio of twentysomething friends through such not-seen-on-"Friends" adventures as scavenging a bug-infested ottoman off the street; "Up for Adoption," for Verizon's go90, was a workplace comedy about pet-rescue volunteers. In one episode of the Facebook Watch series "Quinta vs. Everything," the Quinta character, drafted to eulogize a great-uncle she hardly knows, lands on a solution: given his abiding love of Steve Harvey, she proposes a group viewing of "Family Feud." "It's what he would have wanted," she tells the assembled mourners. "All of us, together, watching 'Family Feud,' rooting against the white family. Together." Brunson was mapping out the comedic sensibility that would later inform "Abbott": simultaneously wholesome and irreverent, with the affectionate yet deadly precision of siblings sparring on the family couch.

Larry Wilmore met Brunson when she appeared as a guest on "The Nightly Show," where he was a host. (They wound up collaborating on a sitcom pilot that never aired.) Wilmore told me he was impressed with her ability to be genuinely funny while still seeming nice. "You never thought she was taking sides," he said. As Brunson got more outside work, she decided it was time to abandon the "security blanket" of her BuzzFeed job. Issa Rae, who landed at HBO with "Insecure" after breaking through with her Web series "Awkward Black Girl," told me that she and Brunson "bonded over being Internet girlies." Brunson looked to Rae for guidance on the Hollywood establishment, but Rae thought she barely needed the help. "Where I identified as this socially awkward Black girl, she can talk to anyone," Rae said.

Brunson took acting roles, joined writers' rooms, and developed shows, and along the way assembled a roster of collaborators who would come together on "Abbott." She met Halpern and Schumacker, her co-producers, when they cast her in a sci-fi-comedy pilot. She met Wehrenberg, the ABC comedy executive, when she was pitching a series that ultimately sold to HBO but never got made. She met Williams when they played star-crossed lovers named Rome and Julissa on "A Black Lady Sketch Show."

Sheryl Lee Ralph, who plays Barbara, the kindergarten teacher based on Brunson's mother, first encountered Brunson on a studio lot, where Ralph was walking around with her twentysomething daughter. (On "Abbott," Barbara has a daughter around Janine's age—to Barbara's dismay, she works in marketing at a liquor company.) "I saw this tiny young woman coming out of one of the doors," Ralph told me. Her daughter "stopped in her tracks": she recognized Brunson from her online videos. "She said, 'Mom, you have to meet her. She's going to be big one day.'" Lately, Ralph said, her daughter "does not waste a moment to say, 'I told you so.'"

Brunson said that, when her own mother saw "Abbott," "it was the first time she ever told me she was proud of

"There are secret ceremonies and things, but mostly we just share tips on how not to pay taxes."

me. I know she doesn't think it was, but it was." In the years since she'd moved across the country, Brunson and her mother had spoken on the phone almost every day; still, she felt as though she'd been trying to explain herself and failing to find the right words. The show, which was intended for an audience of parents, grandparents, and children alike, was a statement of her creative ambitions as well as a testament to how closely she'd been watching her mother's work. Brunson said, "I remember my mom telling me, 'I know who you are now.'"

On a chilly evening in February, Brunson was at the Whitby Hotel, in midtown Manhattan, for yet another award-season event—this time a screening for SAG members. It was two days before the third season's première; the "Abbott" cast had been nominated for a SAG Award for Comedy Series Ensemble, and Brunson was up for Female Actor in a Comedy Series. ("The Bear" would end up taking both categories.) Brunson, wearing a black blazer and shorts scattered with big silver paillettes, arrived in the greenroom before the event began. It had been, she said, "a day."

Her older sister Kiyana had brought her son and daughter (both of whom have appeared as students on "Abbott") up from Philadelphia for a surprise visit. Brunson, at her niece's encouragement, had just made a guest appearance on "Hot Ones," a show in which celebrities eat increasingly spicy chicken wings while being interviewed. Her nose, she reported, was "still running." At the screening, SAG voters would watch an episode titled "Educator of the Year," in which Gregory wins an award he feels he doesn't deserve, because the Board of Education is eager to showcase a Black male teacher. It would be followed by a talk between Brunson and the comedian and actor Ramy Youssef, a friend.

In the time I spent trailing Brunson, she often asked whether the things she was doing were interesting and whether I was having fun. I'd assure her that it was all part of my job, but she seemed to feel that asking was part of hers. She takes her responsibility for others seriously—and sometimes this meant alerting others to my presence. Now, after Youssef arrived in the greenroom and started catching up with her, she interrupted him to say that a reporter was listening.

"I just wanted to talk about how much I *love representation*," he resumed.

"Right, right," Brunson said. "You do representation *real good*."

Brunson seems to enjoy the talent-spotting part of her job. Last season, the rapper and comedian Vince Staples appeared on "Abbott" as a love interest for Janine. Staples's own show débuted on Netflix last month, and he told me he was grateful for Brunson's advice. "How to run a set, how to lean into the things you're good at, how not to get easily offended," he said. "A lot of people just tell you, 'Oh, do what feels right,' but she gave real insight." In 2022, Brunson saw the comedian Sabrina Wu perform at the Just for Laughs festival, in Montreal, and was impressed, especially by a joke about coming out to their dad as trans. Wu also did a bit about having a rivalry with a Harvard classmate, the poet Amanda Gorman. "When I said 'Amanda Gorman,' Quinta playfully booed," Wu recalled. Afterward, when they met backstage, Brunson admitted that she'd toyed with a story line in which Janine and Gorman were rivals. In Season 3 of "Abbott," Brunson gave Wu a role as a substitute teacher. Recently, one of the show's writers told Brunson that the third season's lineup of guest stars felt like an alt-comedy show. She was pleased.

Brunson told herself that this season she'd be better about going home and getting rest, but it remains an elusive goal. "She runs on, like, five hours of sleep a night," Tan said. Dinner with her husband is a scheduling feat. ("It's a big deal—first date in a long time," she told me, of one night's plans to go out late for Korean barbecue.) "I want a baby, but I think I'll either be the world's worst mom or the world's best mom," Brunson said. "I'd want to be there for that kid's every waking moment, but I also know how much I love work, and nothing keeps me away from work—and it worries me."

The next show that Brunson hopes to make is about a teen-age girl coming of age—something for a Y.A. audience, and funny, but with reality's rough edges. "I have trouble seeing where it'll be made," she said. A previous project she developed with the comedian Nick Kroll attempted to strike a similar tone; network executives seemed perplexed. She'd like to explore projects that are different from "Abbott," and movies feel like an appealing counterbalance to the long-term commitments of TV. " 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes' is the only thing I'd ever want to remake," Brunson said. In her estimation, the Marilyn Monroe–Jane Russell movie is the first female buddy comedy. She loves Monroe's comedic virtuosity ("The control she has over her mouth, her eyes?") and also the movie's high jinks—"It is so stupid." She enjoyed Emma Cline's novel "The Guest," and can imagine how she'd adapt it, but that comes with a question: "Would they let a Black person—me—spearhead a movie where the lead is not Black, and the story is not Black?" She paused and considered. "Shonda Rhimes did it."

At the Whitby, Youssef told me that he thought Brunson's achievement was finding a way to combine the demands of her medium with the idiosyncrasies of her personal vision. "Quinta hacked network TV," he said. It was a theme they returned to after taking their seats onstage. "I'm making TV for a wide range of people," Brunson told the crowd. "While I'm making television for Black girls, for Black people, I'm also still making it for a white grandma in Kansas."

She did it, she said, by accepting that not every element of the show would reach everyone. A case in point was the second season's Christmas episode. It was, in some ways, a classic crowd-pleaser: Janine and Gregory's tentative flirtation was in full view as the teachers ventured to a night club. Brunson was determined to feature DMX's "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" during the scene. "This is what Christmas at Abbott looks like to me," she remembered telling network executives, who were skeptical of the expense of licensing the song. "You guys don't know how hard I fought," Brunson said onstage. "Maybe that's one time they were over me, because they were, like, 'Girl, let it go.'" In the end, "Rudolph" played in the club. She described how, at a recent press event, one of the guys doing sound came up to her and said, "I love that you put in DMX." The SAG crowd applauded. "Some people watch that episode, they have no idea what that song is," Brunson said. But she knew that some people did. ♦

"Where I identified as this socially awkward Black girl, she can talk to anyone," the actress and comedian Issa Rae observed.

Johnson proudly calls himself a "nerd constitutional-law guy." Yet in his hands the Constitution's dictates always appear to

coincide with his political interests.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KENT NISHIMURA

THE POLITICAL SCENE

MAGA MIKE

House Speaker Mike Johnson uses a soft touch to push hard-right politics.

BY DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK

The Capitol Hill Club, in a white brick town house a few blocks from the House of Representatives, is a social institution exclusively for Republicans. One evening in October, Representative Mike Garcia was eating there alone when Representative Mike Johnson stopped to chat. Garcia is a first-generation immigrant and a retired Navy pilot from a Democratic-leaning district in Southern California. His predecessor, a Democrat, resigned after a scandal four years ago, and Garcia highlighted disagreements with his party to win reëlection in 2022. He was also a loyalist to former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, a fellow-Californian who had just been ousted by a small band of hard-line conservative rebels annoyed at his willingness to compromise on budget disputes. Garcia had formally nominated McCarthy as Speaker at the beginning of 2023, and his removal deprived Garcia of a patron.

Johnson was personally and ideologically close to the rebels. His district, in northwest Louisiana, votes lopsidedly Republican, and his voting record was as far to the right as that of anyone in the G.O.P. Where Garcia talked about his immigrant story and combat experience, Johnson was a conservative Christian litigator who sometimes warned that hordes of "military-age" migrants were "coming to a neighborhood near you." Yet, unlike other Republican hard-liners, he cultivated a mild and bookish persona. He wore horn-rimmed glasses, called himself "a nerd constitutional-law guy," and garlanded his speeches with quotes from Chesterton and Tocqueville. Johnson had only a small national profile, but inside the Republican conference he was a comer. In 2018, after his first term in Congress, he had been elected chairman of the Republican Study Committee, a conservative caucus that includes about three-quarters of the House G.O.P. and often launches lawmakers toward Party leadership.

At the Capitol Hill Club, though, Johnson stressed to Garcia that he had fully supported McCarthy. The two lawmakers bonded over their dismay at the frantic spectacle now unfolding, as about a dozen other ambitious Republicans competed to replace McCarthy, further dividing the Party. Garcia, who told me that he and Johnson "just commiserated about all the drama," remembered Johnson saying, "You know, either one of us could do this job!"

That was flatly disingenuous. An idiosyncratic backbencher like Garcia could hardly hope to lead the House Republicans, especially given the rightward tilt of the Party, and the role of Speaker—keeping the fractious G.O.P. conference in line while constantly haggling with both the Senate and the White House—was too difficult for someone so new to Washington. But the suggestion flattered Garcia, who also appreciated Johnson's tone of humility. "One of my litmus tests was, if you want this job, I am kind of dubious of you," Garcia told me. "And it was clear that Johnson didn't want it."

Yet Johnson was already talking, quietly, to confidants about making his own bid for Speaker. Representative Jodey Arrington, of Texas, who is a close friend of Johnson's, told me that "Mike called me at the very beginning," as soon as it was clear that McCarthy "was not going to make it." Arrington, the chairman of the powerful Budget Committee and a former senior adviser to President George W. Bush, is a charismatic figure whose name had surfaced on lists of potential Speakers. Johnson started out the phone call by politely inquiring if Arrington himself wanted the job. Arrington, who has three young children, said that he worried about the time commitment. He returned the question to Johnson, who replied that, in fact, he "really felt a sense of calling" to be Speaker—"to move forward the vision" he had for the G.O.P. conference, which included decentralizing

power by sharing it with committee chairs.

Arrington and Johnson then prayed over the phone. "Go with your conviction," Arrington said. "You know you'll have my support."

After three weeks of chaos, as rival contenders rose and fell, Johnson seemingly emerged from nowhere to become the House's fifty-sixth Speaker. Only one predecessor had ascended as quickly: John G. Carlisle, in 1883. The *Times*' Carl Hulse, the dean of congressional correspondents, wrote that it was "doubtful that Johnson could have imagined this moment just a day or so ago." Republican senators had to Google Johnson's name.

Johnson pulled off this upset with the same paradoxical style he'd displayed in those furtive early discussions. Outwardly deferential but privately ambitious, he is a professed Trump true believer whose courteous, churchy persona is virtually the opposite of the insult-spewing, porn-star-paying former President's. While Johnson was quietly lining up backers like Arrington and Garcia, he publicly supported two more senior mentors, Jim Jordan and Steve Scalise—each competing against the other, and each predictably unable to overcome pockets of enmity within the conference. By waiting to reveal his own bid, Johnson retained the support of both mentors until he was ready to advance himself. Years of obliging service to Trump at his weakest moments—voicing steadfast support for him during his two impeachments, offering legal arguments that bolstered his stubborn denial of his 2020 defeat—also paid off for Johnson. On October 24th, after he first added his name to the Republican secret ballot for Speaker nominee, he came in second out of nine, behind Tom Emmer, of Minnesota, the Republican Whip. Emmer had voted to certify Trump's 2020 electoral loss. Trump savaged him on social media as a "globalist" whose selection would be "a tragic mistake." Emmer withdrew within hours, and the next day Trump came out, in capital letters, for Johnson. "My strong SUGGESTION is to go with the leading candidate, Mike Johnson, & GET IT DONE, FAST!," Trump posted, wrapping up the race.

In January, Johnson, seated on a couch in the Speaker's office—his back to his new private balcony, which overlooks the Washington Monument—told me he never doubted that he could win the job if he wanted it. "I always knew in the back of my mind I could do it," he said. Concealing any ambition for the Speakership until the final hour may have served him well, he acknowledged. But, he insisted, this delay had been motivated by loyalty to the other aspirants, not by tactical cunning. Indeed, Johnson told me, he'd won "because my colleagues trust me—and that is a rare commodity in Washington."

"Let me know if you see any corner pieces or ways out of this marriage?"

Most observers in D.C. have dismissed Johnson as an accidental Speaker. After journalists excavated some of his signature cases as a conservative Christian lawyer—suing a Baton Rouge abortion clinic, defending Louisiana's ban on same-sex marriage, advocating for the teaching of creationism—Democrats labelled him a religious zealot whose rise underscored how extreme the Republican Party had become. (Much was made of the fact that Johnson and his wife have a "covenant marriage"—a voluntary arrangement that makes it more difficult to divorce.) The image of a hidebound fundamentalist then gave way to a consensus that Johnson lacked the backbone to lead effectively. He was too inexperienced for the job, too subservient to the most disruptive factions of House Republicans, too frightened of Trump.

Instead of acting like a coach calling plays, Johnson often behaved like a referee mediating among rival wings of the Republican conference. In a meeting with a dozen ultraconservatives in January, for example, he displayed so much empathy for their views that some emerged announcing that he had agreed to renege on a top-line budget deal with the Democrats—forcing Johnson to clarify that he had "made no commitments" in what were only "thoughtful conversations." Democrats have delighted at his struggles. He and other House Republicans have repeatedly accused Alejandro Mayorkas, the Secretary of Homeland Security, of "intentionally" allowing hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants to cross the southern border; on February 6th, Johnson called a vote to impeach him. Yet even some Republicans publicly complained that the impeachment set a dangerous precedent for criminalizing a policy disagreement, and their dissent helped Democrats outplay him. At the last minute, Representative Al Green, a Texas Democrat who had been hospitalized for intestinal surgery, unexpectedly rolled onto the floor in a wheelchair and hospital scrubs, defeating the measure by a single vote. Johnson had to wait for the return of Scalise, the Ma-

jority Leader—who had been recuperating from his own medical treatment, for blood cancer—to impeach Mayorkas the next week. (The Democrat-controlled Senate will quickly dismiss the case.)

Worse, Johnson's critics said, he sometimes appeared simply to follow Trump's lead, even at the price of sacrificing Republican policy goals. In February, the White House capitulated to several House Republican demands for a crackdown on illegal immigration. President Joe Biden, under pressure from Democratic governors and mayors, backed a Senate compromise that would tighten border security and asylum procedures. Republican senators admitted that the Democrats were making concessions they'd never make with a Republican President in power. Yet Trump opposed the deal, for transparently political reasons: he wanted to keep up his "Build the wall" attacks against Biden. Johnson, in lockstep, called the concessions insufficient and the bill "dead on arrival" if it reached the House.

Now Johnson appears to be holding military aid to Ukraine hostage, even as that country suffers its most significant losses since the Russian invasion. A broad bipartisan majority of the House is eager to approve a Senate-passed bill providing more than sixty billion dollars in assistance. But Trump and some of his congressional allies have denounced the funding as an affront to their "America First" credo—and Johnson has refused to bring the bill to the floor for a vote. Democrats are raising alarms that Vladimir Putin could advance on Kyiv while Congress dithers. Dan Balz, the chief correspondent for the Washington *Post*, asked of Johnson, "Does he have any major priority other than survival?"

Johnson, in a series of conversations this year, told me that such critics misjudged him, and failed to appreciate the difficulty of his job. His majority is so slim that he can lose only one or two votes. He can accomplish almost nothing partisan without the buy-in of nearly every Republican, from the hardest of the right to the squishiest of the middle. Moreover, his predecessor, Kevin McCarthy, in a bargain to secure the Speakership, agreed to revise House rules in a way that has made Johnson's position exceptionally precarious. Under the new procedures, any member can force a vote to "vacate the chair"; in the narrowly divided House, Johnson would require virtually unanimous Republican support again in order to keep his job. He also lacks any of the leverage that his predecessors used to keep their cohort in line. Because he became Speaker in the middle of a congressional term, he can't bestow or withhold committee placements or chairmanships until after the next election—if he is still in power. Nor has he raised the vast sums of campaign money that Party leaders typically dole out to buy loyalty (although, as Speaker, he did raise more than $10.6 million in the final quarter of 2023). Rank-and-file members are so unintimidated by him that they brazenly leak to the press anything he tells them—or take to social media.

"You understand what I'm managing here, right?" Johnson told me, in exasperation. He wasn't afraid to lead—he just needed patience and stealth to do it. "If they say I'm holding the cards close to my chest, I *have* to do that, because everything I say gets sent straight to Chuck Schumer!"

The issue of Trump posed an even trickier question. He is at once the dominant figure in the Republican Party and its greatest liability. Nobody else so commands the conservative base—and nobody else so effectively turns out Democrats, as Republicans have learned in election after election since 2016. Yet, because of expected Republican losses from redistricting in several states, riding Trump's coattails may be Johnson's only hope of retaining the majority this fall.

Johnson told me that he considered himself the first genuinely "pro-Trump" Republican leader in Congress. Mitch McConnell, in the Senate, and the former Speakers Kevin McCarthy and Paul Ryan were all holdovers from previous incarnations of the G.O.P. But Johnson first won election to Congress on a Trump-led ticket. He has been echoing Trump's call for a border wall ever since, albeit in Christian terms: "We build walls because we love the people on the inside." Johnson is all for steep tariffs on China and restricting Muslim immigration. Yet he hastened to add that he supported Trump not out of fear but "because of the *policies*." He continued, "What we accomplished in those first two years of his Presidency is amazing!" During that period, he claimed, America had "the greatest economy in the history of the world." Saying that you admire Trump for his policies, though, recalls the way men used to say that they read *Playboy* for the articles. Trump sells a persona, not a platform. After I pressed Johnson to expand on their unlikely bond—Johnson has met with him in the White House and at Mar-a-Lago, flown with him several times on Air Force One, attended Louisiana State University football games with him, and speaks regularly with him—the Speaker's aides told me that he had no more time for interviews. The risk, I surmised, was too great. Johnson could anger Trump by distancing himself too much, or hand ammunition to the Democrats by distancing himself too little.

Some people who know Johnson best, however, told me that his deference to Trump is not what should most scare liberals. Rather, it's Johnson's slickness—the way he doggedly masks his hard-right agenda behind his soft exterior, whether to manage the mercurial former President or the conflicting constituencies within his conference. Some on Capitol Hill call him Magic Mike, for his uncanny ability to parlay his humble "nerd constitutional-law guy" demeanor into political influence. On a podcast, David Barton, a conservative Christian activist from Texas who has known Johnson for decades, invoked an old cowboy axiom to describe the new Speaker: "He'll make you smile before he hits you in the mouth, so that you won't bloody your lips when he breaks your teeth."

I first met Johnson two years ago, in a small office in the Cannon House Office Building, to ask him about Trump's claims that enormous fraud had robbed him of victory in 2020. "*He* believes that to his core today, you know," Johnson told me then. He sounded sympathetic. But Johnson was also discreetly clarifying that he himself had never fallen for Trump's outlandish claims.

Johnson tells friends a Trump story that does a similar double duty. Not long after Trump's Inauguration, Johnson joined a conference call with him about plans to terminate Obamacare, and at the end of the call Johnson promised to pray for the new President. As Johnson tells it, Trump tacitly acknowledged that his own relationship with the Almighty was relatively remote: "Tell God I said hi." He and the former President are

friendly enough to joke, Johnson's anecdote implies, but starkly different.

Some tall politicians use their height to intimidate, as Lyndon Johnson famously did. Mike Johnson, who's about five feet eight, derives a disarming effect from his shorter stature. With dimples, rosy cheeks, and eyeglasses, he gives the impression of a Boy Scout in a business suit. Gray streaks have appeared in his hair since I first met him, but it remains as thick as a teen-ager's, and he wears it fixed like a wave about to break over his forehead.

In an era of insults and vitriol, Johnson is a throwback to the glad-handing operators of earlier generations—a class-president type eager to connect with anyone he meets. At a retreat for incoming freshmen after his first election to Congress, he stayed up one night to draft a bipartisan "civility pledge" for his fellow-lawmakers; he then co-founded a bipartisan "honor and civility" caucus. (Its Democratic members drifted away after Johnson defended Trump's role in the riot of January 6, 2021.) Although many Republicans today refuse to appear on mainstream news outlets that they perceive to have a liberal bias, such as NPR and CNN, Johnson relishes the chance. He has a born politician's talent for repeating canned lines as though they'd just occurred to him, such as his feigned astonishment that a recent Senate foreign-aid bill included "not one word" about the U.S.'s southern border. Sometimes he interjects an unusual disclaimer—"This is not a Republican talking point!"—immediately before repeating a Republican talking point. (The migrant crisis is an "open fire hydrant!")

Johnson seldom wastes an opportunity to flatter a Republican colleague. He told me that Tom McClintock, of California, a relatively little-known congressman whom Johnson trounced in the race to lead the Republican Study Committee, was a personal "hero." While speaking with Representative Jim Jordan, of Ohio, on a podcast, Johnson compared their relationship to Batman and Robin, casting himself in the role of the Boy Wonder. He used the term "brother" to describe Jordan, Scalise, and several other House Republicans; former Representative Liz Cheney, now Johnson's fiercest critic, had been "a sister." Whenever he's asked in interviews about Republican critics, Johnson invariably refers to each one as "a dear colleague" and "one of my closest friends."

If this sounds performative, Johnson, as a high-school student in Shreveport, was almost as enthusiastic about theatre as he was about politics. One former classmate, Stacey Hargon, told me that Johnson's mother didn't believe it when he won the Speakership. She told Hargon, "I felt like I was going to wake up and find out it was just another play that Mike was in." In Johnson's senior year, in 1990, as the comic master of ceremonies at a school talent show, he put on a captain's hat and pretended to paddle a boat across a stage as loudspeakers played Enya's "Orinoco Flow" ("Sail away, sail away, sail away!"). He now often exercises his thespian talents with uncanny imitations of Biden, Trump, and others. He once impersonated the former President on a phone call, convincing his daughter and her friends that Trump was wishing her a happy birthday. After Johnson became Speaker, he amused a visiting friend from Louisiana by imitating McConnell, who'd marvelled at Johnson's swift ascent. "It took me *twenty-two years*," he croaked, as McConnell. (Sitting behind Biden during the State of the Union address this month, Johnson responded in impatient pantomime, stealing attention from the President and reinforcing his bona fides on the right. The conservative *Times* columnist Bret

Stephens compared the reactions on Johnson's face to "the expressions of a constipated turtle.")

Although Johnson has branded himself a hard-liner, he has allowed some ambiguity about precisely where he stands. After less than two years in the Louisiana House, he was tapped to run for Congress by Representative John Fleming, who was stepping down to run for Senate in 2016 and wanted a like-minded successor. Fleming never formally endorsed any candidate, but Johnson freely shared with district residents that he'd reluctantly entered the race at the request of their congressman. Fleming told me, "He sort of established that I had endorsed him without me having to endorse him, which I thought was smart."

Fleming had recently co-founded the House Freedom Caucus, which saw itself as a fiercely conservative counterweight to pragmatists in the Party. Convinced that moderate G.O.P. leaders had packed the Republican Study Committee with loyalists to soften its right-wing bent, the Freedom Caucus's founders made it invitation-only, to hold the line against compromise. (Former Speaker John Boehner called the group's members "legislative terrorists" for blocking routine procedural measures in order to extort demands from the Party's leaders.) A political action committee linked to the Freedom Caucus was one of the top donors to Johnson's first campaign, and he attended almost all of the group's meetings during his first few terms in Congress.

Yet Fleming told me that he wasn't sure if Johnson had formally joined. "He left it pretty vague," Fleming said. "Only he could tell you." Johnson, in fact, never became a member, focussing his energies on the more mainstream Republican Study Committee. Now Johnson, as Speaker, has sometimes found his own efforts stymied by the obstinacy of his Freedom Caucus friends, and he told me that privately he had always disagreed with their obstructionist tactics. "I don't think it is a great idea to go to the floor and burn down all your colleagues and say they haven't accomplished anything," he said. Invoking his legal expertise, he argued that the Freedom Caucus's trademark refusal to compromise undermined the constitutional purpose of Congress. "I have an intimate knowledge of what the Framers intended," Johnson said. "And the point of this exercise is that you sit around a table and arm-wrestle to figure it out—to find consensus."

Remarkably, although several Freedom Caucus members told me that they still consider Johnson an ideological ally, several leaders of the conference's moderate bloc, the Main Street Caucus, said they felt that he was on *their* side. Representative Dusty Johnson, of South Dakota, the Caucus's chairman, de-

EDWARD HOPPER (YELLOW AND RED)

Soiled sunshine on lawns and walls,
the horizon-line melancholy,
the mystery cults of interiors,
the parlor, bedroom, luncheonette,
the worship of empty spaces,
the scummed-over good cheer
of brickface and clapboard.

Our optimism's a darkening soul
that doesn't know the dark is coming.
The windows inflect an ethic of the watched,
the overseen, the secretive: the hidden lives
of architectures, the boxcars, factories,
variety stores, and gabled homes
where life went silent a moment ago.

A woman's Coca-Cola-red pumps,
a moralistic lighthouse, a feral Buick grill,
the arid creamy bumpy wet light.
Our godless churchy solemnities.
Austerity's rapture. Each of us unreachable.
Wind and sand our silenced voluptuaries.
A woman in a slip on a plank of the sun.

—W. S. Di Piero

scribed the Speaker to me as "strategic, pragmatic, and practical."

Johnson is even chummy with some liberals. Representative Jamie Raskin, a Maryland Democrat, told me that he considered Johnson "the most extreme theocrat we have in the House of Representatives." But Raskin also noted that Johnson "has absolutely the best manners of anybody in the Freedom Caucus—there is a real niceness, a *sweetness* about the guy." (Representative Pramila Jayapal, of Washington, the chair of the Progressive Caucus, similarly told me that she and Johnson have "a good, friendly relationship, just on a personal level.")

Liberals like Raskin call Johnson a theocrat in part because he frequently toggles between talking about God and talking about lawmaking in the same conversation. In an October interview with the Fox News host Sean Hannity, Johnson said that the Bible dictated his policy positions on "any issue under the sun." He went on, "Pick up a Bible off your shelf and read it—that is my world view." He frequently emphasizes the "endowed by their Creator" line of the Declaration of Independence. And in talks to church groups Johnson has lamented that America, founded as a Christian nation, has become "post-Christian." Conservative Christians are thrilled with him. They haven't heard so much God talk from a prominent politician in decades.

But, if Johnson's tone is preacherly, he is quick to insist that he means only to encourage Christians to let their faith guide their politics, not to force it on others. "I'm not trying to establish Christianity as the national religion or something," he said in another Fox News interview. Then he repeated that "our Judeo-Christian heritage is the foundation of our country."

Johnson, who was born in 1972, a year before the Supreme Court decided Roe v. Wade, has often said that his passionate opposition to abortion grew out of his experience as the unplanned child of two teen-agers. Friends tried to persuade his seventeen-year-old mother to "take care of the problem," Johnson said, on a podcast. "So this is real—it's personal to me."

So is politics. I first met Johnson shortly after the Supreme Court overturned Roe, and I asked him what the next steps were for the "pro-life" movement. Johnson told me that the Court's decision was "a good one" but, to my surprise, immediately changed the subject, to discuss his work coördinating political "messaging" for the G.O.P. conference. He had evidently seen polls showing that talking about abortion restrictions had become a political liability. As Speaker, he has fallen back on the time-tested formulation that "cultural consensus" on abortion must come before federal legislation. "We are a long way from that," he told me recently. "So it is not on the agenda."

His views on sexuality hew closely to the teachings of the Southern Baptist Convention, where he served for eight years as a trustee of the denomination's public-policy arm. He maintains that homosexuality is a disordered behavior, not an identity. In 2003, as an attorney for what is now called the Alliance Defending Freedom—the evangelical equivalent of the American Civil Liberties Union—Johnson worked on an amicus brief to the Supreme Court defending the criminalization of gay sex. He later represented Louisiana in legal battles to uphold its ban on same-sex marriage, and declared that allowing gay unions was "the dark harbinger of chaos and sexual anarchy that could doom even the strongest republic." During his time as a Louisiana state lawmaker, from 2015 to 2017, he was best known for introducing a bill to prohibit penalizing religious people for holding the view that marriage should be only between a man and a woman—a measure that critics said would establish a right to discriminate against gay couples. He once unsuccessfully sued the city of New Orleans to try to stop the provision of health benefits to same-sex partners of municipal employees.

But his relationship with L.G.B.T. advocates in his district, around Shreveport, reveals the complicated layers of his character. Whereas some Louisiana Republicans refused to meet such advocates, Johnson welcomed them in. Adrienne Critcher, an activist whose son is gay, told me that Johnson tried to bond with her over his own experiences with bullying in middle school, then e-mailed to thank her for their conversation. "I admire your sincere conviction," he wrote. "The story about your son being bullied in jr high was heartbreaking and, as I mentioned, something I myself could

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relate to. No one should have to endure that kind of treatment, and it is a shame that people can be so mean." They could both agree, he continued, "that we need better understanding and compassion across the board. The only way I know how to accomplish that is through respectful dialogue. I hope we can continue ours in the days ahead. In the meantime, I do not regard you as an opponent, but rather as a fellow leader who is doing what she earnestly believes to be the right and noble thing. I would like to regard you as a friend as well, but I understand that may be pushing my luck." He added a smiley-face emoticon.

But in the 2016 primary for his congressional district—the only competitive race Johnson has faced—he leaned heavily on his record of opposition to L.G.B.T. rights. The early favorite was Oliver Jenkins, a Shreveport city-council member who'd been a Marine fighter pilot in Iraq. Alan Seabaugh, a Louisiana state senator who is Johnson's former law partner and managed a PAC supporting his campaign, told me that Johnson "had a huge faith network" on his side. "A lot of that was under the radar." Jenkins, encouraged by the Shreveport Chamber of Commerce, had introduced a city ordinance prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and the Johnson campaign raised alarms that it could punish conservative Christians for their beliefs.

The Jenkins campaign suspected Johnson of resorting to more underhanded tactics: spreading false rumors that Jenkins was gay. Days before Jenkins lost to Johnson, his campaign posted a plaintive online video of his mother-in-law, Mary Anne Selber, attesting that "Oliver lives out a traditional marriage every day." She continued, "After all, he has been married to my daughter for eighteen years, and they have blessed us with two beautiful grandchildren. If you are going to attack a Marine, a good husband, a good father, and a good Christian to win a political race, then shame on you. You, your lies, and the machine behind you are why good men won't run for political office. North Louisiana, we are better than Mike Johnson."

In a statement, a spokesman for Johnson called the allegation of a smear campaign "categorically false," adding that the Speaker would never condone such actions.

Johnson grew up as the oldest of four children southwest of Shreveport, on a small farm with "hogs and a few acres," he told me. His father, Patrick, was an assistant chief of the Shreveport Fire Department. On September 17, 1984, Mike, then twelve, had the TV on while his mother, Jeanne, tended a pot on the stove. A news bulletin came on: there had been a five-alarm fire at the Dixie Cold Storage plant. Moments later, his mother was rushing out the door, sobbing. "The last thing I heard my mom saying was, 'Call your grandmother, I'm going to leave,'" he said. "And I remember just standing there, watching the water boil over."

Patrick Johnson and his partner had been at the plant, each wearing a rubber hazmat suit. An explosion engulfed them in flames. His partner died, and Patrick's suit melted onto his body, severely burning him. He escaped the plant by squeezing through a hole in a wall. The hole's diameter was reportedly eleven inches.

Seemingly everyone in Shreveport knows the story, and believes that only supernatural intervention enabled Patrick Johnson to survive. "It was a miraculous event," Mike Johnson told me. He has spoken of his own life in providential terms. Johnson said in his acceptance speech as Speaker that he believed "God has ordained and allowed each one of us to be brought here," and he has sometimes compared the challenges facing Congress to "a Red Sea moment." (Liz Cheney recently quipped in a television interview that Johnson "believes that God has told him that he's called to be Moses.")

Johnson told me that the trauma of his father's accident had contributed to his political skills. Jeanne spent long stretches of time away to care for Patrick, who underwent more than forty surgeries, and she gave Mike a "quasi-parental role," having him supervise his siblings and take over chores like the laundry. "I kind of lost my childhood, in a way," Johnson told me. Then, on the advice of doctors, Patrick set out to find a drier climate where he could breathe more easily, and this turned into a quest "to find himself," Johnson said. Patrick left the family, then remarried and divorced again multiple times. He plunged into New Age spirituality—his last wife was a Taoist abbess—and composed folk songs to warn other firefighters about the perils of hazardous chemicals. As Patrick embraced hippiedom, Jeanne and the children relied increasingly on their rural evangelical church, where Mike had been baptized at the age of seven in a horse trough out back.

Teachers noticed that Johnson was unusually responsible. When they had to leave their classrooms, they put him in charge. He began adopting a paternal tone toward his peers, too. A classmate, K. C. Kilpatrick Baird, recalled, "He would call you to be your better

self, which was annoying at times, if you did not want to be your better self, as a carefree teen."

Johnson said that managing his pain over his father's abandonment taught him how to project equanimity. "The Scripture says, 'Honor your father and mother'—there is no qualifier," Johnson told me. Even as his dad moved from city to city, Mike visited him often. In 2016, Patrick fell ill with cancer, and Mike welcomed him home to Shreveport. The night Johnson was elected to Congress, Patrick was photographed in a crowd behind his son. He died three days later. "I have a remarkable ability to forgive people, even when they're trying to persecute me," Mike Johnson told me. "That's really important to a job in politics."

While recounting his upbringing, Johnson choked up twice. Two aides sitting in on our conversation fidgeted anxiously. When one extended a box of tissues, Johnson called the aides "sissies" and vowed to pull himself together. He told me that his wife, Kelly, a fellow native Louisianan who is licensed as a Christian counsellor, had helped him "deal with the childhood trauma." But, he said, "it's still raw—that's why I've got it sort of tucked away."

Johnson himself first became a father of sorts around the time he graduated from law school at Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge, in 1998. While volunteering for the evangelical organization Young Life, he got to know a fourteen-year-old named Michael James. Johnson recalled, "We hit it off, and he became my little buddy." He took James, who is Black, to the all-white church he attended, and they'd "go to events and stuff."

James lived in a trailer with his mother and four siblings, in a situation that could be described as chaotic. One rainy January evening, Johnson heard that James had moved out; he found him in a cardboard refrigerator box behind a Walmart. "He was in a terrible situation and he couldn't go back," Johnson told me, and the social-service system in Louisiana at that time would have put him "on the road to drugs and crime." Johnson and Kelly had recently married, a year after meeting at a wedding in Baton Rouge. They brought him to their house and eventually became his legal guardians. James lived with the Johnsons—interrupted by unsuccessful attempts to reunite with his mother—for about three years, until he turned eighteen.

Mike and Kelly Johnson have since had four children, and he has generally tried to protect Michael James's privacy. But alluding to the story is hard for a politician like him to resist. In 2019, at a Democrat-led House committee hearing on reparations for slavery, Johnson brought up his relationship with James to show a personal connection to the experience of racial bias. "I have walked with him through discrimination he's had to endure," Johnson said. He also declared that James opposed reparations. (James did not respond to my request for an interview.) Johnson argued that the proposal would be unconstitutional and would unfairly burden taxpayers "for the sins of a small subset of Americans many generations ago"—an assertion that drew boos from the crowd.

Later, when Johnson addressed an audience of conservative Christian donors at the Council for National Policy, he told the story of James and the hearing rather differently. He compared his relationship with his Black son to the 2009 movie "The Blind Side"—"except my kid was not an N.F.L. prospect." And he claimed that those in the hearing room had booed at him merely for talking about his relationship with James. The committee room had been full of Black Panthers, Johnson said, and "Black Panthers don't want any intermingling between the races." The Black Panthers disappeared as a movement decades ago, but the conservative audience gasped in sympathy.

Soon after Johnson became Speaker, the comedian Devon Walker played James on "Saturday Night Live." "Hey, guys, I am his adult Black son," Walker announced. "I am only eleven years younger than him, and I am kind of a secret. It's normal—don't look into that at all!" The *Daily Mail* tracked down James, who lives outside Los Angeles, and reported that he had a "rap sheet" of petty crimes.

But James, who is now forty years old and married, with four children of his own, told the tabloid that he was grateful. If not for the Johnsons, he said, "I would probably be in prison or I might not have made it at all." James calls the Johnsons "Mom and Dad," and during one interview Johnson told me that he'd been laughing with James on the phone the previous night: "James said, 'My friends are, like, You're famous! You are the only person I know with an "S.N.L." skit!'"

In 2015, Johnson wrote on Facebook that Trump "lacks the character and the moral center we desperately need" and would be "dangerous" in the Oval Office. But by the time Johnson entered the congressional primary, in early 2016, Trump was soaring in popularity among Republicans, and Johnson became a full-throated supporter. "President Trump quickly won me and millions of my fellow Republicans over," Johnson recently told the *Times*, after reporters unearthed his critical post.

His direct cultivation of Trump began during a visit to the White House on behalf of the Republican Study Committee, in March, 2019. As Johnson recounted to the Louisiana political reporter Greg Hilburn, he and Trump talked "at length" about the House Democrats' investigations of the President. Johnson called the inquiries a "vendetta," and he later joined a so-called impeachment "defense team"—in reality, a list of congressional surrogates deputized to handle public relations for the President.

Johnson's description of himself as a "constitutional lawyer" rings oddly to other attorneys. Lawyers who argue in court about the Constitution typically refer to themselves less grandly. They call themselves appellate lawyers, or specialists in a field of expertise like voting rights, the First Amendment, or administrative law. Yet Representative Raskin, a former law professor, told me that he considered Johnson "by far the most constitutionally informed member of the Republican conference." Kimberly Wehle, a professor at the University of Baltimore School of Law and a legal-affairs journalist, was commissioned by *Politico Magazine* to assess legal briefs that Johnson had filed as a litigator. She faulted him for favoring the religious freedom of evangelicals over the rights of Americans who don't want their tax dollars to support Christianity. She called his philosophy "the First Amendment for me but not for thee." But Wehle told me she was surprised to find that many of his legal briefs were of "high quality—reasoned and measured."

The identities of Johnson's former

clients have dominated recent headlines: an evangelical student who disparaged homosexuality, a county board opening its sessions with prayer, a creationist theme park seeking a state tax subsidy. But, like most legal work, his cases typically turned not on disquisitions about the vision of the Founders but on narrow, technical details. His defense of the county board centered on the fact that it had invited opening prayers from the clergy of every house of worship in the local phone book (even if in practice the invocation usually mentioned Jesus). When Johnson argued that Kentucky officials had improperly withdrawn a previously promised tax rebate from an evangelical group's Noah's Ark amusement park, he focussed on the timing and the context. In oral arguments, Johnson said that the officials had set themselves up as "ecclesiastical arbiters" by objecting that the park was "too evangelical" only after they learned that it would promote not just the Old Testament but also the Gospel.

Johnson's verbal dexterity made him a valuable ally for a President beset by criminal allegations. During Trump's first impeachment, Johnson gave about fifty television interviews on the President's behalf. Johnson told Hilburn that Trump frequently offered him feedback after TV appearances, and returned Johnson's calls "within a couple of hours." The elevated access, Johnson argued, benefitted his constituents. By the end of Trump's second impeachment, Johnson told me, he'd been forced to develop a "subspeciality" in such proceedings as part of his expertise in constitutional law.

On the Sunday after Biden's 2020 victory, Johnson was onstage at a church in his district, giving a talk about Christianity's place in American history, when Trump called. Johnson was about to turn on his phone's speaker for the crowd—"because what a delight that would be!"—but Trump was "not in the best of moods," Johnson told me. He was calling "to vent about 'We've been cheated' and all of that."

Trump demanded that Johnson and other House Republicans back his "Stop the steal" theories about widespread fraud and rigged voting machines. But Johnson quickly concluded that the claims were impossible to prove, if not demonstrably bogus. "I never egged on any of that," he stressed to me in 2022.

Seabaugh, Johnson's old friend and former law partner, told me that they consulted extensively after the election, and identified a potential constitutional argument that would sidestep the lack of evidence for Trump's allegations. Article I of the Constitution says that "each state shall appoint, in such manner as the legislature thereof may direct, a number of electors." But, during the pandemic, courts or other officials had sometimes changed voting procedures to allow more absentee ballots or to enable social distancing. A lawyer representing Trump, they decided, could argue that Pennsylvania and other states Biden won had changed the rules unconstitutionally.

Seabaugh told me he and Johnson both knew that this argument would be "very difficult," because of the troublesome question of how to correct even incontrovertible mistakes after the fact. Suppose Pennsylvania officials *had* improperly changed the rules. It would be unprecedented to set aside the ballots of millions of Pennsylvanians. For the same reason, courts do not annul elections later deemed to have taken place under racially discriminatory gerrymandering schemes. "The question of a remedy is the problem," Seabaugh told me, and Johnson was "smart enough to see the problem."

Johnson ignored it. These states "violated the plain language of the Constitution," he told me two years ago. The electors chosen by those states were "the fruit of the poisonous tree."

The Republican attorney general of Texas made a similar argument to the Supreme Court, along with a grab bag of other assertions, and asked the Justices to let the legislatures in certain states pick their own electors. Perhaps not coincidentally, these legislatures were all controlled by Republicans. Johnson told me that the Texas brief was "not a great case, to put it charitably," in part because Texas lacked standing to argue about the procedures of other states. (Indeed, the Court rejected the suit for that reason.) But Johnson said that he wanted "to get my one drumbeat question in front of the Justices," so he retained lawyers to write an amicus brief in support of the Texas appeal. If Johnson was focussed only on the narrow constitutional issue, though, his lawyers had much broader ambitions. The first name listed on the amicus brief was William J. Olson, a far-right gadfly who the *Times* later reported was soon speaking directly with Trump and recommending that he use his executive power to overturn the election—even if that required firing his Attorney General and vetting state voter rolls.

Johnson's argument, however legally tenuous, had at least avoided all the nonsense about Dominion voting machines and mysterious bags of Atlanta ballots. In 2022, he thanked me for appreciating the distinction between his claims and Trump's. "It has been a source of great frustration that we are sort of lumped in together with people who wanted to overthrow an election and, you know, to tear down the Capitol," he said.

Such distinctions, however, did not deter Johnson from seizing more chances to endear himself to Trump. On December 9, 2020, Johnson e-mailed every Republican in Congress, saying, in underlined red text, that Trump had "specifically asked me" to "request that all join on to our brief." He noted that Trump himself "will be anxiously awaiting the final list to review."

In retrospect, Johnson's amicus brief may be the moment he first upstaged McCarthy as the Republicans' leader. McCarthy had told other G.O.P. leaders that he'd refused to sign Johnson's brief. But after a hundred and five House Republicans signed on to the initial filing of the brief—half the conference—Johnson refiled it the next day with twenty more names, including McCarthy's. Johnson graciously described the omission of McCarthy's name as a clerical error.

On January 5, 2021, the day before the House was to certify the Electoral College results, Cheney arranged for Representative Chip Roy to address a closed-door meeting of the Republican conference. Roy, a staunch conservative and a former assistant attorney general of Texas, argued that the House certification must remain pro forma. For Congress to question the legitimacy of state election rules would violate conservative principles of federalism, and votes to reject Trump's defeat would invite Democrats to try to block

Republicans from the White House in future elections. "I am going to get roasted by my base," Roy told his colleagues, but "this is a defense of the United States Constitution." (The journalists Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns obtained a recording of the conference meeting.)

Johnson, ever courteous, approached Cheney before the meeting. He recalled saying, "Liz, you have to at least let me present. I am not going to try to convince anybody, but there are eighty or ninety people out there who have asked me for my views, and we are doing a disservice to the conference if you don't let me at least address this. Give me five minutes." She agreed, planning to let Roy have the last word.

Johnson began by again reminding his colleagues of his credentials, noting that he had studied for this moment "more than when I first became a constitutional lawyer, twenty years ago." He declared that his fellow-Republicans needed neither to endorse Trump's unproven fraud claims nor to validate Biden's victory. The arguments in his amicus brief—which, he noted, many had already publicly endorsed—constituted "a third option" for the lawmakers. Johnson argued that they could reject the electors from certain states solely on the basis of "constitutional infirmity" in pandemic voting procedures. In fact, Johnson argued, their oath to the Constitution required them to invalidate these electors.

Johnson's legal conceit allowed Republicans to side with Trump without embracing his frivolous claims. Johnson acknowledged its political convenience. "But, as God is my witness, that was not my objective," he said. "I was not trying to influence anybody." He was just defending the Constitution.

Cheney, in a recent TV interview, called Johnson's position "chilling." She contended that he'd essentially put himself above the law, by claiming that, as a member of Congress, his opinion about the Constitution entitled him to "throw out the votes of millions of Americans." She said, "That's tyranny. It's not the rule of law."

McCarthy, at the January 5th meeting, ducked the question about certifying electors, merely thanking both speakers for their input. "I think we have really grown as a conference," he declared.

Whatever Johnson had told Cheney about not trying to "convince anybody," he helped persuade a hundred and thirty-nine House Republicans to vote to reject Trump's defeat in at least one state. Three-quarters of those members closely echoed Johnson's reasoning. A senior Republican staff member who was involved told me, "He put lipstick on that pig," adding, "The vast majority of members aren't constitutional scholars. So as soon as he has made his pitch that 'this is what the Constitution demands,' the vast majority of the conference thinks, This guy is smart, he loves his wife, he talks about her a lot, he went to a good school—who am I to argue with him?"

During the closed-door meeting, Representative Debbie Lesko, of Arizona, explicitly warned the conference that angry Trump supporters who were convening in Washington might turn violent toward lawmakers. Many "actually believe that we are going to overturn the election," Lesko warned. "And when that doesn't happen . . . they are going to go nuts."

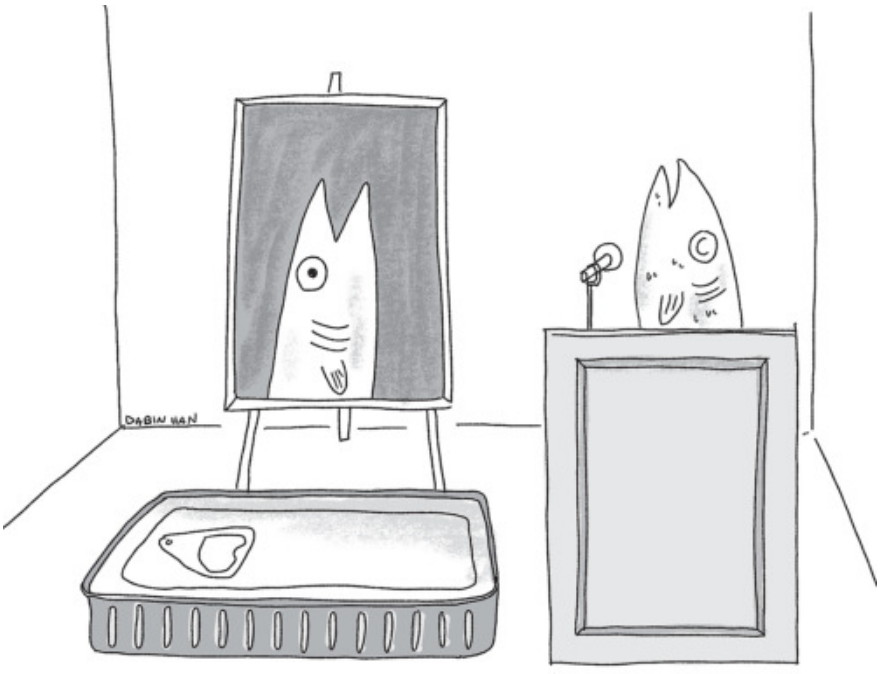
Though Johnson was in the room when Lesko spoke, he later insisted to me that on January 6th he hadn't even realized that Trump was holding a rally by the White House. When Johnson heard angry voices off the floor of the House, he thought that it was "a terrorist attack," he said, adding, "I did not know whether it was lefties or righties—that is how oblivious, how deep in the weeds, your nerd constitutional-law guy was." He told me that he felt "heartbroken" by the assault on American democracy. (Nonetheless, Johnson has never publicly objected when Trump and his congressional allies have referred to those arrested for the attack as "hostages" or "political prisoners.")

Two years ago, Johnson noted to me, with satisfaction, that the Supreme Court had agreed to take up a case involving his argument about the sovereignty of state legislatures over election procedures. The case, Moore v. Harper, centered on whether a North Carolina court could invalidate a redistricting map. "They are going to answer that singular question we presented to them—three years late," Johnson told me.

Last summer, the Court ruled, 6–3, that the Constitution does *not* give state legislatures sole authority over election rules. When I brought this up to Johnson, he told me that the Court's ruling did not constrain him, even now that he was a leader of the legislative branch of government. "I still contend—and no one can argue otherwise—that the plain language of the Constitution was violated," Johnson said, adding, "The Supreme Court has been wrong a *lot* of times."

States are no longer changing election procedures in response to a pandemic. But,

"Tyler makes a good point. Do we have any pillaging and plundering songs that aren't problematic?"



"Her final wish was to be laid upon a perfectly grilled slice of sourdough bread, drizzled with trendy olive oil, and consumed by a hot girl for a viral Instagram reel."

• •

with the same Presidential candidates headed for a rematch, it's not hard to imagine that Trump might again dispute a defeat, or call on the Republican-controlled House to object to results. Would Johnson again urge Republicans to reject electors if he deemed a state's voting process constitutionally defective? He said, "As the Speaker of the House, I am going to follow the law. It doesn't matter what anybody tells me—I am going to follow the Constitution. If we are presented with a slate of electors that was selected in an unconstitutional manner, my legal analysis is going to be *exactly* the same."

In 2024, it will be even more difficult for Johnson to square his decorous Christian persona with his support for Trump. The former President has called for the "termination" of parts of the Constitution, talked about executing a general for insubordination, called opponents "vermin" and journalists "criminals"—and the list goes on. Johnson brushed it all off as "campaign rhetoric." In a conversation in the Speaker's office, he told me, "People in this building say crazy things every day."

When I pressed him on the reported plans of Trump's advisers to exert more control over federal prosecutors—whose political independence is critical to democracy—Johnson fired back that the Biden Administration had already "weaponized and politicized" the Justice Department. "Trump and I agree about that a hundred per cent," Johnson said. Prosecutors "targeted Trump because of who he is—and they knew he was going to run again." Johnson told me he was convinced that the special counsel Jack Smith was "not a good-faith actor" and was "out to get Trump." He noted that other Republican lawmakers had complained that Smith had "exceeded his authority," adding, "We are going to let all that play out." (Trump and some conservative legal scholars have argued that Attorney General Merrick Garland had no authority to appoint a special counsel in the first place, without action by the President and the Senate, and some House Republicans have threatened to subpoena Smith or cut off his funding.) And if Trump were convicted of a felony? Johnson said, "There is no prohibition in the Constitution against someone who has a felony becoming President."

At every turn, Johnson assured me that he would "follow the Constitution," no matter what Trump or anyone else demanded. Yet in Johnson's hands the Constitution's dictates always appear to coincide with his politics. Reparations violated the Constitution. The Freedom Caucus's obstructionism violated the intentions of the Founders. The Democrat-led impeachments of Trump were an attack on "the Constitutional order." The Supreme Court, in Moore v. Harper, misread the Constitution. But the Republican inquiry into impeaching Biden was a solemn constitutional "duty," as was the impeachment of Mayorkas. Johnson even invoked his authority as a constitutional expert during the competition to succeed McCarthy. Some Republicans proposed fully empowering Patrick McHenry, a popular lawmaker who, after McCarthy's ouster, had become the interim Speaker. Such a move could have blocked Johnson's path. Several people present at internal meetings told me that Johnson had brought up convoluted arguments about the constitutional role of the Senate president pro tempore to object—regretfully—that empowering an interim Speaker would be unconstitutional.

Johnson's first big test as Speaker was the passage, in January, of a measure to set a figure for total government spending. Former Speaker McCarthy's efforts to reach a compromise with the Democrats in the Senate and the White House had met with fierce opposition from Trump, who urged the House G.O.P. to stop funding the government. "UNLESS YOU GET EVERYTHING, SHUT IT DOWN!," Trump wrote on his social-media platform, Truth Social. "Whoever is President will be blamed." When McCarthy nevertheless reached a deal with the Democrats, the Freedom Caucus rebels removed him. Yet the balance of political power with the Democrats didn't change with McCarthy's ouster, and after two months of renegotiations Johnson returned with essentially the same deal. Representative Lloyd Smucker, a Pennsylvania Republican close to Johnson, told me at the time, "It's Groundhog Day. It's no different."

A few far-right lawmakers threatened to topple Johnson just like McCarthy. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, the Trump superfan from Georgia, said that she might file a motion to vacate

the chair. Representative Max Miller, of Ohio, a former Trump campaign operative, called Johnson "a joke." Representative Warren Davidson, also of Ohio, said that his ballot for Johnson as Speaker was "one of the worst votes I've ever cast." McHenry, feigning sympathy, told me that Johnson "had a lot to learn."

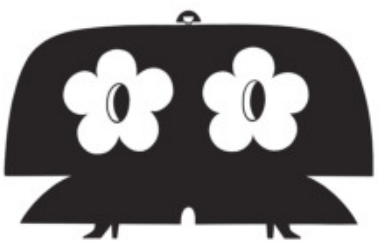
A hundred and six Republicans—almost half the conference—voted against Johnson's deal. It passed only because of nearly unanimous support from Democrats. Trump, though, refrained from attacking Johnson as he had McCarthy, and the new Speaker survived in part by convincing the hard-right faction that deep down he was still one of them. "*I* am a conservative hard-liner," he kept repeating in press conferences and interviews.

Funding for Ukraine presents another test. Before becoming Speaker, Johnson at least twice voted with other hard-liners against bills providing aid to the country. Yet cutting off funding would deliver Ukraine to Putin. Democrats are already invoking Neville Chamberlain. In a recent interview, Jake Sullivan, Biden's national-security adviser, declared that the course of the war "comes down to one person, Speaker Johnson." Sullivan called Johnson's choice "one of those instances where one person can bend the course of history."

Johnson has evidently been searching for a new angle that would allow the House G.O.P. to fund the war while attacking Biden over Ukraine as loudly as Trump does. Garcia, the California Republican, told me that at a meeting last fall Party leaders had asked him to explain his vote against a three-hundred-million-dollar funding patch for Ukraine. Garcia, who worked for the defense contractor Raytheon after leaving the Navy, explained to his colleagues that he opposed the bill because he objected to the Biden Administration's strategy. ("I'm not pro-Russia, I'm pro-*winning*," he told me.) He offered to write a memorandum about an alternative approach, but did not hear any interest. Johnson, however, had attended the meeting, and a few weeks later, shortly after McCarthy's ouster, he texted Garcia, "Hey brother, have you finished that Ukraine paper?" Garcia was impressed. "I was, like, 'Wow, you remember that?'" he told me.

Garcia prepared a fourteen-page report recommending that the U.S. send specific forms of more lethal aid to the Ukrainian military. The day after Johnson became Speaker, he hand-delivered Garcia's report to the White House. Garcia told me that Johnson had described the report as the new House Republican "hymnbook" on the war. (On November 3rd, the White House sent a fourteen-page response, which Garcia shared with me; he called it inadequate.) Johnson had "evolved," Garcia told me, "from something like 'Never a dollar more' to 'Let's fund it at the right levels and *win*.'" But, if Garcia's ideas are Johnson's "hymnbook," he has yet to sing from it in public, leaving it unclear how much he might sacrifice support for Ukraine in order to placate the America First crowd.

Some people close to Johnson contend that he is the right leader for House Republicans precisely because of his knack for straddling—or, at least papering over—the intraparty battle lines of the Trump era. Accommodating the takeover by Trump and his brand of populism is the Party's signal challenge today. And nowhere is the schism between the G.O.P.'s Trumpian present and its Reaganite past more visible than in the House, where Trump and his acolytes have persistently bedevilled conventional Republican leaders such as McCarthy and Ryan. But Johnson "speaks the dialect of traditional conservatism, and he also speaks the America First dialect," Representative Drew Ferguson, a Georgia Republican, told me. Trump and his hard-line allies



are willing to give Johnson leeway because they trust that he is ideologically one of them, Ferguson said, and "the moderates know he is politically astute enough not to make them do things that will automatically get them defeated."

Johnson and his friends are the first to insist that beneath his civil smile beats the ruthless heart of a Freedom Caucus stalwart. Persuading far-right members of the House to keep the government open is strategic—a means to preserve Republican congressional seats and to exact future cuts. Changing the subject from abortion is the way to elect more "pro-life" lawmakers. Convincing Trump and the Freedom Caucus not to attack Johnson and other Republicans for funding the war in Ukraine would not only deter Putin; it would surely boost the G.O.P.'s chances of winning in November, thus advancing other conservative goals.

For Democrats, a smooth and soft-spoken hard-liner may be a bigger threat than a caustic screamer. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, aware that Johnson is tougher to demonize than some of his more pugnacious pals, immediately tried to brand Johnson as "Jim Jordan in a sports coat." Democratic operatives are trying to tie all Republican lawmakers to Johnson's far-right record: his votes for a ban on abortion and against same-sex marriage; his introduction of a "Don't Say Gay"-style bill that would prohibit discussions of gender identity with children under ten at any school, hospital, or other institution receiving federal funding; his calls to cut social programs and remove environmental protections. Most of all, the Democrats are hammering Johnson as a cynical Trump stooge—"MAGA Mike"—who collaborated in the attempt to overturn an election.

If Trump reoccupies the White House and Republicans control Congress, what would be Speaker Johnson's priorities? In our conversations, he rattled off his best-case scenario: cracking down on illegal immigration, raising tariffs on China, cutting taxes, expanding oil-and-gas drilling, dramatically rolling back all kinds of regulations. Stripping regulatory power from government agencies would be "a major theme," he told me. Liberals might say that deregulation would give free rein to polluters, banks, and other corporate interests. Johnson told me that he'd be upholding a lofty principle: "restoring the constitutional authority of Congress as a co-equal third branch."

"Trump learned a lot of painful lessons in his first term," Johnson told me, including that liberal bureaucrats in government agencies "might be working against him." A second Trump term would be like the first, but "on turbo," Johnson promised, adding, "I think we are going to be right off to the races!" ♦

Two entries from a new alphabet of the colonized world, an illustrated ABC.

A is for apple (*Malus domestica*), a member of the rose family (Rosaceae), famously thought to be the fruit the serpent gave to Eve and Adam to eat. It had been the one thing they were forbidden to do, eat that fruit, and after they did they fell in love with the world around them—and understandably so, for they were in a garden. The fruit they ate could not have been the apple we know today, as that fruit is native to Central Asia. Most likely what Eve and Adam ate was a pomegranate. There is a legend that says there are as many seeds in a pomegranate as there are commandments in the Torah, the Bible of the Jewish people, known to many others as the Old Testament.

Z is for *Zea mays*. Called "corn" in North America and "maize" in much of the rest of the world, it is sometimes treated as a grain, when it is dried and ground into a meal (polenta). When it is freshly picked and eaten, it is a vegetable. Like all grains (rice, oats, barley), it is a member of the grass family (Poaceae). It was cultivated by the occupants of what we now call Mexico for thousands of years before Europeans arrived with their natural curiosity (curiosity being a part of what it is to be human) and thoughts of conquest and subjugation of the native inhabitants. Human beings, as they have migrated to and occupied various parts of the earth, have always found nourishment in the grass family. *Zea*, corn or maize, is grown all over the earth for food, and is said to be the grass most widely cultivated for human consumption.

Neighbors | *Zach Williams*

PHOTOGRAPH BY DEVIN OKTAR YALKIN

Not long after our twins turned three, my wife, Anna, accepted a transfer to the West Coast. The opportunity was lucrative, but that wasn't why we were eager to go. Anna had spent that March and April involved with another man, a colleague, someone whose name I'd never heard until she told me about him. She said that it had been a terrible mistake, that it had only made her hate herself, and that this person had now begun almost to frighten her, continuing to call after she'd asked him to stop, declaring that he'd leave his family, demanding to speak with me. I was surprised to find that, more than anything, I felt sorry for her. The episode was the culmination of a long withdrawal that each of us had made from the other—for some time, our mutual unhappiness had felt like too delicate or intimate a subject to broach. I knew I wasn't blameless. The hard-to-fathom part, really, was that she'd hidden it from me. It felt so old-fashioned, predicated on such a rigid understanding of who we could be together. In bed, in the dark, I told her that, if we wanted to try again, we would have to redraw the map. We spent the days that followed talking more openly than we had in years—about our girls, our childhoods, old lovers, doubts and desires we'd each been afraid to confess.

In San Francisco, we found a house in the Outer Sunset, four blocks east of the Pacific. The neighborhood was row after row of small town houses, all with the same footprint, in sun-bleached pastels. Most of them had been built in the thirties, which was not long after the area had been known as the Outside Lands—desolate and windswept, just scattered people growing vegetables in the shifting dunes. We'd been warned against the Sunset because of the cold and fog that often settled there. But on clear days we woke to pristine ocean views. There was a walking path by the beach that led north to Golden Gate Park and south to the zoo. The girls would run ahead, holding hands, leaning close sometimes to whisper, and we'd push the stroller behind them. They could talk with just the barest application of language; they really did have that preternatural intimacy I'd always heard about in twins. After they'd gone to bed, Anna and I would sit on the deck with some wine or a joint and watch the sunset. It felt good to be there. I told her which of my friends I'd always been slightly in love with. She told me that she'd never stopped silently reciting the nightly prayers she'd learned as a child. I asked her once what she'd wanted from her relationship with this other person, what she'd hoped might be possible. The question made her laugh. She said, Ecstasy, a miracle—I don't know.

Weekdays, Anna dropped the girls at school before driving to work. I made an office out of our downstairs mother-in-law unit, built into the garage's back corner, and stayed home. Soon I felt attuned to the place, the way it sounded and felt across time. Surfers jogged down the hill every morning, carrying their boards. Deep in the night, sometimes, the sinking moon lit up the ocean. People were friendly. Hal and Eleni were our neighbors to the right. Early on, they rang our bell with flowers and a cheerfully annotated map of the neighborhood, printed from Google in black-and-white. Across the street from us was another young family who seemed very nice; we resolved to take our kids to the playground together someday but never did. And, in the house to our left, there was an elderly woman who lived alone. Hal said that her name was Bing.

Weeks passed before we met Bing, though we often heard her—she had a booming cough and a landline phone with an old-fashioned clapper that seemed to be mounted on our shared wall. All night long, she played her television at earsplitting levels. I assumed she slept in front of it. Now and then, I'd see her from our bedroom window, hanging laundry on her back patio. She was hunched and overweight and used a walker, and the whole sad spectacle—the way she'd labor to get the basket of wet clothes out the door at the back of her garage, let it drop onto the plastic table there, then hang each article, one by one—was hard to watch. I've always been a bad sleeper, and sometimes, as I was lying awake at four or five, a sudden glare through the window would startle me: the motion-activated spotlight over Bing's back door. I imagined that if I got out of bed and walked to the window I would see her on the patio, dressed for the day, making her slow, lonely progress at something or other.

One Saturday in September, on our way out the door to Point Reyes with the girls, we found a conversion van parked in front of Bing's house. A man our age, forty or so, was there, helping Bing up into the back seat of the van. It was our first opportunity to say hello, so we loitered in our driveway as he braced his shoulder against her, rubbing her back very tenderly as she climbed, her entire body trembling. Trying not to watch, I set my eyes on the walker, which stood alone on the sidewalk. The man got Bing seated, helped buckle her in, then jogged over to introduce himself. As we talked, Bing smiled out at us, leaning forward to see through the van's side door. His name was Henry, he said. He was Bing's youngest; he'd grown up there in the house beside ours and now lived in Stateline, Nevada, where he was a rock climber. I thought he looked too put-together for that, with his unwrinkled golf shirt tucked into khaki shorts, but the van, I saw, was rugged and full of gear. In that Californian way, to which I was still becoming accustomed, Henry seemed authentically pleased to meet us. He wanted to know if I played tennis. There were courts behind the high school, and he had his racket in the van. He'd come home to take Bing to the doctor, but he'd be around all weekend. Henry was well built, in easy possession of his body; he carefully and politely divided his attention between Anna and me as he spoke. I declined, with regrets. I'm pretty sedentary, I said, except for walks in the woods, things like that. Sure, he said, no problem. When Anna called out to Bing to say that she'd raised a very nice son, Bing responded warmly in Chinese from the back of the van. Before we left, Henry asked if we might exchange numbers. His father had died last year, his brother lived in Denver and his sister in New York, and his mother was stubborn about her independence. It would be a comfort to know that there was someone just next door.

Then, one morning in March, I was at my desk when a sound that had been nagging at me as I read from my laptop drifted to the center of my attention: Bing's phone. It had been ringing incessantly, I realized, half a dozen calls or more. It

stopped, a minute passed, then it started again. I stood, stretched, and walked out of my office, through the garage, and into the foyer of our house, where I pressed my ear to the wall. When the phone rang again, I could feel it against my head. And there was the sound, too, of Bing's television, played at its soaring overnight volume. But now it was close to noon.

I climbed the stairs to our bedroom and walked to the window. No laundry on Bing's line. It was misty and cold, a dark shelf of clouds seated atop the ocean. I felt tired, as I always did at that time of day; I was fully remote, working East Coast hours. And I knew that when I checked my phone—which, to prevent distraction, I always left charging in the kitchen—I would find messages from Henry. It was inevitable. He'd explain that his mother wasn't answering the phone and he was growing worried. His request that I knock on her door would be apologetic but insistent. And when she didn't answer—of course she wouldn't; why would she answer her door but not the phone?—he'd tell me where to find a key. Soon I would be on the other side of the wall, slowly climbing Bing's stairs, calling her name. I had a bitter feeling about it, as if this outcome, this moment, had been waiting for me since I'd first seen Bing, and by extension long before that—since we'd found this house in the Outer Sunset, or since Anna had received the offer to go to California. I watched the ocean for another minute or two, then walked into the kitchen for my phone.

Bing's house was a bone yellow. There were no succulents in the ground out front, no gourds or pots or small cheerful things. All the curtains were drawn. I thought she'd put her garbage out on Tuesday, but I couldn't be certain. I'd seen Bing through our kitchen window once, shuffling back from the curb with no walker and the recycling still up by her garage. I'd gone down to offer my arm. She took it, smiling, and we walked together. When I commented on the day, which was cold but bright, she nodded, said something I couldn't understand, then turned her eyes back to the ground. I looked into her open garage. There was a car inside, an ancient black Mercedes that must have been off the road for many years. There were cardboard boxes wilted with moisture, newspapers in short stacks, unused gardening tools hanging on the walls.

Now I rang the bell, then pounded on the iron gate—most of the houses had them, small gated entryways. No answer, I texted Henry. As my screen registered his typing, I hurried over to Hal and Eleni's and rang their bell. No one home. The driveway across the street was empty.

My phone buzzed. *I can't reach anyone else nearby. There's a key under the flat stone beside the walk. Again am so sorry but would you please?* Whatever protests I had—that this wasn't my business, that Henry was the one who'd left his poor invalid mother so that he could scale cliffs in Tahoe, and that someone else should be appointed to do this, not me—ran on a distant parallel track in my mind. The key was there, pressed by the stone into the pale, dusty soil. I had to wrestle it some in the lock, but then the gate sprang open.

Battered sneakers sat in pairs by the wall of the entryway; old junk mail lay on the ground. I knocked on the wooden inner door. I called out, Bing? This is Tom, your neighbor.

No answer. But the inner door was unlocked.

The sound of the television, caustic at that volume, broke over me as I entered. The lights were off inside, the air close. It was clear that the house's layout was identical to ours: a foyer off the garage on the ground level, living space up on the second floor. I put my hand on the bannister at the bottom of the stairs. I'm coming up, I yelled, though I knew how absurd it was to do so. I would climb the stairs, surface in the living room, and find Bing dead on the sofa in the television's changing light.

My lips and face were numb, I had a sense of moving further out of myself with each step, and when I did find Bing it was almost exactly as I'd imagined—though it was an armchair and not a sofa, and she was seated upright. But what I saw first, before any of that, was the man by the window on the far side of the room. The curtains were drawn, lights off, and because I couldn't make out his features I thought he was deep in shadow. Then a commercial for tile cleaner threw vivid blues and whites across the room, and I saw that he was wearing something over his head—a tight-fitting black sleeve that covered him entirely from the neck up, something like Lycra, without eye or mouth holes. Apart from that, he wore a gray hooded sweatshirt, zipped up, and dark jeans. He stood very still, hands at his sides, facing Bing.

There was no question that Bing was dead. You'd never mistake it. Her eyes were half open, lips parted, hands in her lap and upturned. She wore a thin white robe, feet on the ottoman, and the robe fell open above her knees. I looked quickly. The skin on her thigh shone like pearl.

I can remember feeling a confused impulse to smile and apologize to the man for intruding. There were what looked like paint flecks on his jeans, and my mind supplied the rationalization that he could be a handyman. But of course that wasn't right. More likely he was a burglar. Hal had warned me about the roving professionals who loved these old houses; they could drill through the garage doors, trip the wires that ran to the electric openers, steal bikes, tools, anything, and be gone in seconds. And yet nothing in the house appeared to have been disturbed. The man held nothing in his hands. He hadn't run, or made any moves, or threatened me in any way. The front gate had been locked and the spare key in its right place. I'd seen no hole drilled through the garage door. Unless he'd sneaked in through the back—which was difficult to do, all the yards were fenced off, there were no alleyways—I had no idea how he'd entered the house.

My phone buzzed in my hand. Henry calling.

What I wanted was to turn and run down the stairs and out into the street. I would run until my chest burst. But I felt paralyzed by the man, by the extraordinary volume of the television, and by Bing. And what if he were violent, this person? I guessed I couldn't turn my back on him. Still, I understood that some action was incumbent upon me. We couldn't stand there forever. So, despite it all, I raised my voice over the television and said, I'm Tom. Henry asked me to come.

The commercial changed again. The room grew dark, then light.

I nodded toward Bing. I said, Henry asked me to check on her.

Across the room, the man shifted on his feet.

Bing seemed newly dead. There was no odor, nothing like that. It wasn't some awful spectacle, just a fact needing attention. And, faced with this unexpected presence, I found myself thinking very clinically. I'd told him I was here to check on her, and so now I had to—check for breath, or a pulse, even if there was no point in doing so. I'd never really taken anyone's pulse. I had the idea of taking my own, to rehearse, but I found that I didn't want him to see me do it. My tongue and throat were dry, the numbness spreading through my head.

I told him I was going to check on her now.

As I moved into the room, he took several steps sideways and back, and in that way we maintained roughly the same length of floor between us. Just as in my house, the kitchen and living room were contiguous, split by a wall with open doorways at either end, west and east. He was hovering now at the eastern threshold, where the floor changed from carpeting to linoleum.

I'd only ever stood beside a dead body at a funeral. It upset me to see Bing up close, but I touched her neck with two fingers, as I'd seen it done in movies. Her skin was cool and not unpleasant, and my eyes moved to a framed photo on the wall: Bing and her family in younger days. Henry was easy to pick out, but Bing herself was nearly unrecognizable—tall, slim, and radiant. The friendly-looking man beside her, smiling without showing his teeth, must have been her husband. They all stood around a restaurant table, in suits and dresses, hands on the chair backs.

To the man with the head covering, I said that she was dead.

I flushed when I said it, looking at his shoulder to avoid the sight of his face. Even in the low light, the fabric must have been sheer enough to see through. He seemed to be tracking my movements—like an owl, or an insect.

I told him I would now have to call the authorities. Before I do it, I said, I'm going to turn off the television. Then I will open the curtains to let the light in.

The remote control sat on Bing's armrest. Once I'd pressed the power button, I saw I'd chosen the wrong order of operations: I would have to cross the floor in the dark. I felt dizzy doing it; I imagined the man striking from the left. But I kept my composure, and, when I'd pulled open the curtains and let the day's meagre light in, he was there, as before. He'd moved back again, a few steps, through the doorway and into the kitchen. We were now a little closer to each other. I could see that the armchair was a maroon suède, and that the couch beside it was covered in plastic. On the tray to Bing's right was the last of a meal. I held my phone high and watched him as I dialled.

And he began taking long, slow steps backward, deeper into the kitchen. The woman who came on the line asked what my emergency was. I began to explain, but just then he passed from sight—behind the dividing wall. The operator asked if Bing was breathing. I couldn't answer; I was too startled by the man's sudden absence, which was even worse than having him there in front of me. In five quick steps, I entered the kitchen on a sharp line from the window. There he was, still moving backward, passing Bing's refrigerator. The operator told me to begin chest compressions. Now I matched each step the man took with one of my own. I couldn't let him out of my sight again. I told the operator that Bing was stiff and cold and that I didn't want to break her ribs—all of which was true. He was nearing the kitchen's western end. No, I replied to the operator, I had not been present at the time of death. Yes, I was able to remain at the scene. He moved backward through the doorway and into the living room, by the top of the staircase, where I had entered. Here was his chance to descend the stairs and exit the house. That was what he'd been doing, I reasoned, trying to leave without crossing my path.

But he didn't do it. He kept on through the living room, still taking those long, backward steps. He was making a circle. The operator asked if I had any indication that the death was not natural. I didn't know what he was an indication of. It wasn't that I thought he'd killed Bing, or that anyone had. But he was no handyman. Nor could I believe any longer that he might be a burglar. I hated and tried to avoid seeing the place where his nose pressed against the fabric, and the weird hollow at his mouth.

The death appears to have been natural, I said.

Then the operator asked if I was alone in the house. I was moving now past Bing, and he was by the window again, his hands pale white in the light there.

I said yes.

It's just you and the deceased? the operator asked, to confirm.

He passed again into the kitchen. I followed.

I said yes again—out of concern for myself, certainly, though I also felt

UNTITLED

December 30, 2023

And a day goes by, and tanks, and the sky a festival of kids flying kites, and blood
flowed behind a panting car.
And a day goes by, and the planes, and the tent of the displaced makes a bet
with time: winter is late.
And a day goes by, and the snipers, and the market itself has no salt: so I said:
No worries, the merchants have plenty of sadness.
And a day goes by, and artillery, but my neighbor's funeral passes along
slowly, why rush at a time like this!
And a day goes by, and the newscasts, and when evening came, it was a bit
joyous to find us all there with none missing, except the house.

—Nasser Rabah

(Translated, from the Arabic, by Emna Zghal, Khaled al-Hilli, and Ammiel Alcalay for the Brooklyn Translation Collective.)

a protective responsibility toward Bing, and toward the house. I wanted no confrontation with him; I just had to get through this.

Other voices were now on the line, impassive, distorted by static—a dispatcher, coördinating with police and E.M.T.s. Help was on the way. The operator asked me to wait on the line with her. I didn't see that as an option, so I ended the call. To the man, I said, O.K. They're coming now. And once I'd heard myself say it I realized it was true. The words buoyed me. All of this would be over soon. They're coming, I repeated. He passed the refrigerator again. I would steer him back toward the stairs. He had to go. This time, I thought, he would, of course, go down.

When he didn't, I saw how very small my understanding of or purchase over all of this was. I began to panic. He moved past the television, toward the window. Our circuit was unbroken. The repetition had the character of a nightmare. I told him that he'd be arrested if he stayed, but it came out in a pleading tone, and, anyway, I wasn't sure I believed it. The police, walking up those stairs and into this—it was like two incompatible realities. And, besides, they might not arrive for eight or ten or twenty minutes. He knew that time belonged to him. I wanted to sink to the floor and put my head between my knees, but I had the terrible thought that he would just keep on with his bizarre movements, passing me each time he repeated the circle.

Bing's landline rang. The sound frightened me badly. Anna and I had been right—the phone was mounted on our shared wall, in Bing's kitchen, directly across from where the man now stood. As the phone kept ringing, it struck me that he'd been there with that sound all morning—and just as heedless of it, probably, as he appeared then. Something about that terrified me. How long *had* he been in the house? I felt I couldn't rule out days, or weeks. When he neared the stairs again, it occurred to me that I could run up and push him—two hands hard on the chest, or one on the chest and the other at his throat—and he'd fall. Maybe he'd break his neck. The numb feeling covered my body and seemed to spread into the space around me. He was at the top of the staircase now. I gathered my breath, tensed my shoulders. But I couldn't do it. Next time, I told myself. I had one whole repetition of the loop to get my nerve up.

He moved past Bing, past the television. I felt as if pulled along blindly behind him. There was a bookshelf by the window. Approaching, I scanned it for implements. A heavy brass bookend looked like the best thing, and once I'd reached the shelf, chest heaving and vision clouding, I picked it up.

But then, down through the window, I saw the ambulance pulling to the curb. Two E.M.T.s got out. I knocked on the glass.

There was the sound of the door from below and then feet on the stairs. I stayed still, and he sank deeper into the kitchen until he was gone from view. I watched the far doorway, the western one, to see if he'd emerge. But he didn't.

The E.M.T.s were a man and a woman, dressed in blue, the man with a clean-shaven head and tattoos down his neck, the woman with close-cropped hair. They went straight to Bing, searching for any ghost of breath or a heartbeat. They paid no attention to me. I couldn't conceive of what I might say to them—that someone else was here, yes, but how to render an explanation beyond that?

The kitchen was all done in yellow. Yellow-print linoleum flooring, pale-yellow counters. There were apples in a mesh basket hung from the ceiling, a cereal box beside the toaster. The dishwasher was ajar. And there was an open door in the wall, one that before had been closed. I would have taken it for a narrow pantry, but now I could see that it was a back staircase, cramped and twisting, leading down to what I knew was the garage. The staircase looked illegal, out of code; the wood was unfinished and I had to turn sideways to enter. I felt for a switch, found none, and began to descend, not at all certain that the steps would hold my weight. The door fell shut above me. In the dark, my breathing grew louder. The brass bookend was wet in my hand. Now I could see nothing, and the texture of the air changed; it was damp and cool and had a mossy taste. Finally,

reaching with my foot for the next step, I stumbled. I'd come out at the bottom, into the garage.

It was pitch-black. I moved in tiny shuffling steps, hands out in front, and inhaled sharply when they landed on something. The Mercedes, covered in dust and cobwebs. I braced against it, holding the bookend tightly, breathing hard. I could feel him there with me, as if the dark were a substance that joined us. I thought, This is it. Now he's going to do it, though I didn't know what it was. I kept expecting my eyes to adjust, the car's outline to emerge. But the darkness was total—a rare thing. I set the bookend down on the hood. Then I took my hands away from the car. I let them rest at my sides. The garage became vast.

Anna had said once that it fascinated her to have the ocean so near—it was as if infinity were just outside our bedroom windows. I felt something similar in that garage, the perceptual illusion of boundlessness. I no longer needed to announce or explain myself. There was nothing to study or question. And I was too scared to think. In fact, it sometimes seems that I've applied conscious thought to that moment only retroactively. I took a breath and held it. A paradoxical calmness came over me. And what I felt, then, was that my life was not in me but diffused across the darkness, which was an unbroken field containing everything. Me and him. Anna, the girls. Bing. Everything. And so, no matter what happened next, there could be no consequence, because I had no identity separate from that field. No one did, nothing did. Everything just was, together, without boundaries or names. This appeared to me as a plain description of reality and not a moral or personal judgment. I had never felt anything like it, nor have I since.

A door opened, and light flooded the garage. A police officer stood there in the foyer. Blinking, looking around, I saw that I was alone. What I assume, though I'll never know, is that the man went out the back door and was gone before I even started down the stairs.

That afternoon I sat at my desk, looking over the back yard and down the hill to the ocean, until it was time to walk up the hill and collect the girls. Henry knocked on our door that evening. He had driven from Tahoe. Earlier, when we'd finally spoken on the phone, the conversation had been strictly practical. Now I was prepared to face accusations. I almost confessed the whole thing to him in the doorway before he said a word, but instead he wrapped me in a bear hug, chin pressed into my shoulder.

I couldn't sleep that night. Around four, Bing's motion light flashed on and lit our room. Hal and Eleni brought over two loaves of banana bread in the morning. Anna stayed home from work. We dropped the twins at school and then walked up the coast. There were crows everywhere, more than usual. That was a strange thing about the neighborhood, the number of crows. They were enormous and severe against the pastel houses and beach and sky.

The day was bright but windy, the path uncrowded. I told Anna about how I'd touched Bing's neck, and about the E.M.T.s and the police, and the morticians who had come last to wheel out the body. I told her about the photo of Bing and her family on the wall. And then I told her that there had been someone else in the house when I arrived. Up until that instant, I hadn't quite known whether to say it, and, when I heard the words leave me, I felt nervous, almost ashamed, in a way I couldn't quite make sense of. It was just that what had happened seemed untranslatable—to the bright Pacific morning, to the sound of the surf, to Anna or to anyone else.

She asked what I meant. Who was it? I said I wasn't totally sure. Where in the house? Upstairs, in the living room, by the window. What did I mean, by the window? What was he doing? I felt my neck and ears flush, and one of those mild dissociative clouds passed over me—how strange, I thought, to be here in California, so far from everything I was familiar with. I didn't understand what had happened at Bing's, or how to talk about it, and I still don't, which is why I think of it often. The problem, now, is that I can remember that moment in the garage, but not the feeling of it. It's grown too distant. On occasion, I've come close—when falling asleep, or on the highway, by myself, and once in an elevator.

A bicycle was coming up quickly from behind us. Look out, I said, and stepped to one side of the path. Anna moved to the other. We waited for it to pass. I felt tired and sullen, as if my life had gone on too long. I wished I were alone; I thought how simple things might have been if only she'd never told me anything.

When we started walking again I said, I think he was a handyman. He must have been there to work. I guess he'd had a key. That was all. I'd only wanted to mention it. She asked if he'd spoken with the police. No, I said, he'd left before they arrived. It wasn't important. And, if she didn't mind, I felt ready to change the topic.

I asked her whether she was hungry. We went and had a meal at a nice café on Judah Street.

That summer was cold and dreary for weeks on end. Henry didn't plan on selling the house, so it just sat there, vacant. I found it harder and harder to focus at my desk, knowing that Bing's garage was on the other side of the wall. By August, we'd made up our minds not to stay in San Francisco. There were lots of reasons. Anna and the girls went first, on a red-eye. I spent another week selling some furniture, tying up loose ends. I still had Bing's spare key. The night before I left, I walked next door to her house with the intention of entering. It was ten or eleven, the clouds steely and low, reflecting the city's light. The neighborhood was silent. I stood looking through the gate, holding the key. It was just an ordinary house, I told myself, an ordinary garage. I put the key into the lock, turned it, pushed the gate open. Then a car started down our block. I thought I'd wait for it to pass, but instead the car slowed and pulled into the driveway beside ours. It was Hal and Eleni. I stood with one foot inside Bing's open gate, not at all sure how to explain myself. But Hal just got out of the car and waved. Eleni opened their garage and started rolling out the bins. I closed the gate, locked it, and walked to meet them. We all spoke pleasantly for a while. ♦

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BOOKS

HOT AND BOTHERED

How Candida Royalle set out to remake the porn industry.

BY MARGARET TALBOT

In 1979, a group called Women Against Pornography opened an office in what was then, in the organizers' view, the belly of the beast: Times Square. WAP members, predominantly white feminists, who believed that porn had the power to reinforce, and even breed, misogyny, led others who shared their views on eye-opening tours of the neighborhood's peep parlors, X-rated movie theatres, and live sex shows, hoping to turn out shocked shock troops for what was then a growing branch of the women's movement. There were some ironies, not to say cruelties, to this mission. The great nineteen-eighties debates known as "the feminist sex wars" and a lot of writing by queer critics and memoirists would help reveal them. In "Times Square Red, Times Square Blue," from 1999, the Black gay novelist Samuel R. Delany wrote elegiacally about how the seamy old Forty-second Street had fostered cross-class contact and welcomed sexual encounters that could have happened only in darkened theatres and similar spaces; he lamented its sanitized successor. Even in 1979, the *Times* was noting that the WAP office had taken over a location that was formerly "a soul food restaurant and gathering place for transvestites and prostitutes."

On the other side of the country, I was finishing high school that year, in Los Angeles County's suburban San Fernando Valley, a place that I had no idea was then becoming, and would remain for several decades, the center of porn production. What I did know was that the world was lightly stitched with other people's desires and with public settings to satisfy them in. There was the friendly neighborhood drag bar, the Queen Mary, down the street from the Sav-on drugstore where my friends and I got our school supplies. There were the no-tell motels with the blinking neon signs on Ventura Boulevard. On the way to the L.A. airport, on Century Boulevard, there was a sign for nude bowling. Spotting it from the car, my mom would say, in mock confusion, "Now, who do you suppose is nude in there—is it the bowlers?" Driving through Hollywood, you'd often see marquees advertising "Live Nude Girls." She'd say, "Much better than the alternative."

The feminists of WAP did not anticipate—who could have?—how irrelevant places like Times Square would become to their crusade, how thoroughly the porn industry was soon to be transformed by new kinds of capital and technology. The anti-porn arguments of the Catharine MacKinnon–Andrea Dworkin camp would ultimately be swamped not by the passionate counter-arguments of so-called pro-sex feminists, emphasizing female agency and unruly desire, or even by more mainstream liberals stressing free expression and the First Amendment, but by the sheer deluge of porn soon to be released through the home-video market and, later, the Internet. The first videocassette recorder widely purchased for home use, Sony's Betamax, came on the market in 1975, followed the next year by a competing format from the company JVC. In 1980, there were roughly two million VCRs in American households; by the end of the decade, there were more than sixty-two million. X-rated videotapes helped fuel the steep demand for the new gadgets, and vice versa. Hardcore headed home and curled up in the den.

And there was just so much of it—hundreds of thousands of X-rated videotapes were available for home consumption in the eighties. The kind of pornochic feature films that in the seventies had been shown in now shuttered adult theatres—"Deep Throat," "Behind the Green Door," "The Devil in Miss Jones"—gave way to videos that patched together sex scenes with perfunctory dialogue and barely-there plotlines. It wasn't the narrative arcs that most viewers were after.

The shift toward sheer volume would be accelerated by the arrival of free Internet porn, and particularly by the advent of the global behemoth Pornhub, which relies heavily on pirated clips and on content uploaded by users. In 2010, a somewhat mysterious German software guy named Fabian Thylmann bought Pornhub and a number of other purveyors of online sex stuff, and turned them into a mighty conglomerate that eventually acquired the bland, Silicon Valley name MindGeek. (Since August of last year, MindGeek has gone under the even more opaque name Aylo.) In 2020, Erika Lust, an adult-film director and producer, told the *Financial Times*, "They came into the market with a business model based on piracy and completely destroyed the industry, putting many production studios and performers out of business."

Not many lives reflect these successive eras of modern porn and our attitudes toward them more revealingly than that of Candice Vadala, better known as Candida Royalle, an adult-movie actress turned feminist-porn pioneer. Few have tried with as much ardent, self-serious

ABOVE: TIM LAHAN

With her production company, Royalle helped make sure that feminist porn was no longer regarded as a punchline or a paradox.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JOAN WONG

determination to remake the industry from the inside. With her production company, Femme, Royalle set out to produce hot, explicit films that rejected what she called, at various times, "plastic formulaic pounding dripping in your face porno" or "big-boobed babes having meaningless, passionless sex with some perfectly buffed 'stunt-cocks.'" The results were mixed, but intriguingly so.

In an assiduously researched, elegantly written new biography, "Candida Royalle and the Sexual Revolution" (Norton), the historian Jane Kamensky makes a strong case for her subject's story as both unique and, in a curious way, representative. Royalle, she writes, "was a product of the sexual revolution, her persona made possible, if not inevitable, by the era's upheavals in demography, law, technology, and ideology. Her life could not have unfolded as it did in any place but the United States, or in any time but the one in which she lived." Kamensky was until recently the director of the Radcliffe Institute's Schlesinger Library, an unparalleled research collection on the history of women in America, and it was in this capacity, not as a fan of, say, "Hot & Saucy Pizza Girls" (1978), that she got interested in Royalle. Reading the film star's obituary in the *Times* sparked a thought. The Schlesinger had the papers of Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and WAP. What if Royalle, a very different kind of figure in the sex wars, had maintained anything like these comprehensive records of her own life and career?

As it turned out, she had. At the core of Royalle's personal archive were the diaries she had kept almost continuously from the age of twelve. (There were also photos, videos, clippings, costumes, and correspondence.) Kamensky is fascinating on what she calls "the Great American Diary Project," an endeavor encouraged by teen magazines, therapists, moms, ministers, and books—"Harriet the Spy," "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret," and that depth charge of adolescent-girl diaries, Anne Frank's. (After reading Frank, young Candice pledged "to write interesting things from now on.") Women who grew up in the nineteen-sixties and seventies might find it easy to picture their first diary even now—likely a pocket-size embossed book with a tiny, inadequate lock and key, into which you poured your secrets and aspirations, which were often, in an era that didn't exactly prize female ambition, one and the same.

"From the first page, she addressed the book as a person, a *you*, to whom she said good night at the end of each entry," Kamensky writes, of Royalle's dear diary. At fifteen, she told it, "I'd never throw you out! You've sort of become a part of me." Over the decades, the diary would serve as both a goad to and a document of the kind of endless, restless self-searching that was the template of many people's lives in her generation. Hers would encompass a dalliance with transactional-analysis therapy, of "I'm OK—You're OK" fame; years of more conventional therapy; and a late-life search for the mother who'd abandoned her. Royalle's thirst for self-knowledge couldn't be quenched. "Still trying to unlock the key to myself," she wrote in 2013. "Myself. Myself, myself, myself, myself."

As a young girl growing up in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, Candice (Candy) Vadala had some joyful things to confide—she wanted to be a "coed," a mother, and a "famous dancer"—and some very, very sad ones. Her father, Louis Vadala, was a jazz drummer who styled himself as a free-ranging hepcat. He met his first wife, Peggy, in St. Louis, when he was touring with a musical combo. Peggy was a "brash and glamorous" eighteen-year-old with a young son and an ex-husband in the state reformatory. Louis and Peggy were married, and before long were living on Long Island with two little girls, first Cinthea, and then Candice, born in 1950. Louis's Italian American family, who were Catholic (Peggy was not), gave his new bride the cold shoulder. And it wasn't only Louis's relatives. Family lore had it that Peggy had given birth to Candice at home to save money on hospital bills, and that her hepcat husband parked himself in the living room while she screamed through labor in the bedroom. When Candice was eighteen months old, her mother went home to Missouri for good. Louis was granted custody of the girls—unusually for that era—and, though visitation rights were stipulated for Peggy, she never saw either of her daughters again. Louis married a woman named Helen, who worked as a cigarette girl and longed to be a lounge singer; the family settled into a modest apartment building in striving Riverdale. He needed help raising his children, but Helen wept a lot and drank and got rough with them when she did. Worse still, when Cinthea hit puberty, Louis developed a sexual obsession with her. He started standing outside the girls' shared bedroom at night, gazing at Cinthea as she slept, while touching himself. He scrawled an obscene suggestion in Cinthea's diary, which he erased but left legible.

The family's interpretation of this behavior, Kamensky argues, would have been subject to a reigning pop-psychoanalytical atmosphere not well

"Hat or no hat?"

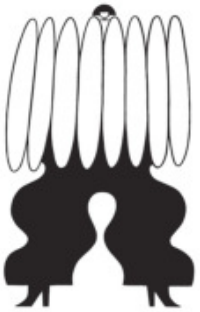
PREVIOUS PAGE: SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM FREDA LEINWAND; DONA ANN McADAMS; CANDIDA ROYALLE PAPERS, SCHLESINGER LIBRARY / VERONICA VERA

equipped to help any of them. That atmosphere downplayed or denied the likelihood of sexual or physical abuse in the home, and cast blame for family troubles on "frigid" wives and sometimes even on "alluring" daughters. Candice, showing her familiarity with contemporary psychological lingo, wrote in her diary that Louis was "terribly neurotic" but that Cinthea, too, was "obviously neurotic." Candice felt excluded from the central household drama, which seemed to her to revolve around Cinthea, but noted succinctly that "this family can make you sick."

Not surprisingly, Candice wanted out, and she got out. After high school, she took a job at Bergdorf Goodman, studied illustration at Parsons School of Design for a bit, and determinedly, frustratedly, pursued her first orgasm, with an affectionate boyfriend and with various hookups. Like many young women, she felt that famous click of recognition when she first attended a consciousness-raising meeting. She joined a women's-liberation collective in the Bronx, and wrote enthusiastically in her diary, "The main purpose is to raise your consciousness as a woman & become aware of your capabilities—what you can do as a woman—without the aid of men!"

In January, 1972, she decamped to San Francisco. Cue the Buffalo Springfield song "For What It's Worth" ("There's somethin' happening here / But what it is ain't exactly clear") and the stock footage of fringy free spirits cavorting in the park. Clichés aside, San Francisco really was a center of alternative life styles and permissive sexuality, from the topless night clubs of North Beach to the burgeoning gay scene in the Castro. Candice moved to the Haight, naturally, into a three-story Victorian group house on Belvedere Street whose shifting cast of gay and countercultural tenants dubbed themselves the Belveweird Freakos. (Of all the signs of a lost, never-to-be-regained, era here, the fact that this raffish bunch could afford to rent a three-story Victorian house in San Francisco might be the single most poignant.)

She fell in with underground-theatre people and performance artists, including members of the rowdy, kick-lining drag troupe known as the Cockettes. She began performing in D.I.Y. plays and campy revues that poked fun, in song and dance, at gender inequality and boring sales jobs and capitalist greed. She was beautiful, she had a good voice, and she had a rebellious, political streak. Maybe at this point she might have swung toward the kind of art career that Karen Finley or Holly Hughes would craft in the nineteen-nineties, provoking the N.E.A. and the Christian right while entrancing downtown audiences, or found her way into the neo-burlesque hipster scene that took off in New York and L.A. in those same years. But alternative theatre didn't pay much. She was using a lot of drugs. Her heart was getting broken repeatedly by a boyfriend who was ethereally lovely but manipulative, and addicted to heroin. To make ends meet, she started doing porn—adopting Candida Royalle as her professional name—and found that it paid better than any of her previous work. First came nude modelling, then loops (grainy, low-budget depictions of sex acts made to run in peep shows), then full-length movies.



She remained fond of some of the dirty movies she did in San Francisco and L.A. in the seventies. She liked the aforementioned "Hot & Saucy Pizza Girls"—"for its sincere silliness." She had fun working with friends on a giddy, raunchy parody of the soap-opera parody "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman," called "Hard Soap, Hard Soap." Kamensky says that Royalle brought to the production "big screen presence and a lot of style, courtesy of her own '50s fashions," and always delivered her lines "with conviction."

But some of the work was dismal for her to make and, later, to watch. One movie contains a scene in which two men rape her in a laundromat. Kamensky describes another of her films, in which Royalle's character is a housewife, whose "brutal husband" pushes her—through, oh dear, psychoanalysis—"to shed her 'hang-ups,' chiefly about anal sex." The work on that one was gruelling. Royalle recalled spacing out on the hideous décor, and "counting the minutes while sucking hard so I can get my money and run." More than once, she'd swear off adult-movie acting, telling her diary, "Pornography is not my thing. Amen. It's been good for a few hundred." And, in declaring another hiatus, "So much for the world of pornography. It was a brief flirtation with a male dominated industry."

In the mid-seventies, the same years that Royalle was acting in movies such as "Carnal Haven" and "Easy Alice," a rising contingent of feminists was busy shaping the theory that, as the writer and activist Robin Morgan put it, "Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice." (Kamensky points out that this line would be quoted, approvingly, on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives by the California congressman Bob Dornan—one of those moments which alerted sex-positive feminists to the overlap between right-wing repression and the new anti-porn movement.) Susan Brownmiller, in her influential 1975 book, "Against Our Will," wrote that "pornography is the undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda"—and compared it to antisemitic caricatures during the Holocaust.

The new movement detected no silliness—sincere, insincere, whatever—in *any* porn, and nothing defensible. It was this argument that *all* porn is misogyny—queer or straight, homemade or big-budget, rough or tender, elaborate B.D.S.M. orgy or unaccessorized vanilla coupling—that put Royalle off. That and the idea that all women who acted in adult films had been railroaded into it. Royalle hadn't always loved her choices, but she'd been the one to make them. She wrote a letter to *Ms.* (which declined to publish it) demanding to know why the publication seemed to "want nothing to do with a woman who's been directly associated with the adult film industry unless she has a horror story to tell."

But when it came to criticizing the actual, existing adult-film industry—sure, she could do it with the best of them, and with a lot more inside knowledge than most. "The world of pornography, from the simulated quickies to the higher budget feature films," she wrote, "is not at all concerned with what people have learned from women's or men's liberation, and in fact still bases

its success on all the old traditional oppressive male attitudes toward sex." The answer, she believed, wasn't banning porn; it was better porn.

In 1984, she and a business partner started the production company Femme, to turn out films that would appeal to the growing market of women and couples watching erotic videos at home. "I don't think that women want to see waves crashing, fade to black," she told the audience of "The Phil Donahue Show," looking stylish and professional, and sounding authoritative. "They want to see the nitty-gritty, too, and something hot and spicy. But they want more sensuality, more foreplay." By then, Royalle had moved back to New York and married a young Swedish man, Per Sjöstedt, with Scandi-porn bona fides. His father, who ran a big Scandinavian erotic-film company, helped bankroll his daughter-in-law's new venture.

Royalle had a particular vision for the films that she thought both women and men open to watching porn together would enjoy. The horniness onscreen had to look, or even *be*, mutual. (She liked to recruit actors who were actually together, or hot for each other, in real life.) There would be more foreplay and more of what she called "afterglow"; couples (these were generally hetero twosomes) were shown hugging and kissing, and sweating together après sex.

She was intent on "letting men see what many women actually want in bed," as she put it. There would be no money shots of men ejaculating hither and yon; she didn't happen to care for those. Nor would she feature women having sex with each other just to titillate male viewers: "It has to be intrinsic to the story, or they have to be lovers in real life." She'd treat the performers with respect and appreciation on the set; in response to the AIDS epidemic, she introduced safe-sex protocols. (In a vignette from the Femme movie "A Taste of Ambrosia," from 1987, a woman applies her partner's condom "so slowly and meticulously," Kamensky notes, "that the scene could be used in a sex ed workshop.") On the other hand, Femme films still included genital closeups ("meat shots," in the industry parlance), the requisite six sex scenes that Kamensky says mainstream porn movies featured, and blow jobs aplenty.

The first two films the company released, both in 1984, "Femme" and "Urban Heat," offered a series of scenes with a distinctly New York-in-the-eighties sense of place—sex in stairwells and freight elevators; New Wave-y looking guys in leather jackets; people in mullets and headbands dancing at a crowded club; smudgy New York skylines; couples getting up to stuff on their tarpaper rooftops or in their un-air-conditioned apartments, with the timely intervention of some ice cubes.

More ambitious was her nearly two-hour narrative feature "Three Daughters" (1986), which she shot in a warmly lit and tastefully appointed house in suburban New Jersey. As Kamensky points out, Royalle's script might be said to have remade her own family. There's a Waspy but loving matriarch, played by Gloria Leonard (a friend from Royalle's support group of porn actresses, called Club 90), a father whose sexual attentions are focussed squarely on his wife, and a cultured home life, with nice table settings. Touchingly, Royalle has outfitted each of the three daughters with a fulfilling career path: the oldest has a job at the U.S. Embassy in London, the middle is a gifted concert pianist with a rock-and-roll side, and the youngest is about to go to Springfield University, for its "great pre-med program." All three get to have plenty of satisfying sex in the course of the movie: with, respectively, a loving fiancé, a handsome, buttoned-up (but not really!) young piano teacher, and a female bestie, succeeded, in time, by a male reporter.

Though the movies didn't always get a lot of love from reviewers for the adult-entertainment trades ("steamy, not seamy" was one disappointed verdict), thousands of fans wrote letters to Royalle, thanking her for the movies, asking for sex tips, or suggesting scenarios. A correspondent who described herself as a "black female currently in a relationship with a white male" requested scenes of interracial couples. A rabbi from New Haven wanted copies of Femme videos for her Jewish women's group. Royalle became something of a celebrity spokesperson for the idea that feminist porn was not an oxymoron, co-founding an organization called Feminists for Free Expression and debating MacKinnon on the "Donahue" show. She was a prized guest speaker at conventions of sex therapists, and, with the rise of cultural studies, in the late eighties, on college campuses. Linda Williams, the author of what was perhaps the first major academic study of porn's filmic conventions, "Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'" (1989), was an admirer.

By the time Royalle died, at sixty-four, of ovarian cancer, she had her own house, a pretty, shingled cottage on the North Fork of Long Island. She gardened, doted on her cats, visited with friends, and received plaudits from a younger generation of alt pornographers. (She and Sjöstedt had long since divorced.) She was disappointed by the new generation of mainstream porn: "The adult-porn industry is becoming a trash heap of over-the-top extremities of the most violating acts foist[ed] upon a girl," she had written in her diary in 2003. She feared that the "young men being brought up on this latest crop of feelingless mechanical crap are learning some terrible things about sex and women."

Kamensky leaves us with the sense that Royalle's victories were soon eclipsed. It's true that the only unalloyed winner in the sex wars was capitalism, and, specifically, Pornhub, which the sociologist Kelsy Burke, in her authoritative recent history, "The Pornography Wars," refers to as "the Amazon of porn." A.I. sexbots are presumably next. Still, it's a little jolting to hear Kamensky suggest that Royalle would have done better to stick with that women's-liberation group in New York than to head out to dissolute San Francisco: "Her most substantive contribution to women's liberation arguably came in her early twenties, during her stint with the Women's Liberation Collective of the Bronx Coalition, which offered life-saving pap smears to poor women in public housing and fought to end the war in Vietnam. It is a tragedy both of Candice's life and of second-wave feminism more broadly that the collective's aversion to lipstick and lace drove her west, toward a more hedonic and less material vision of revolution."

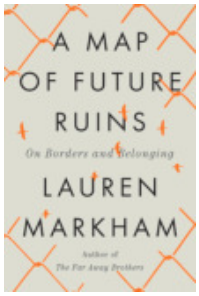
Is it, though? It's hard to imagine venturesome, exhibitionistic Royalle settling down to a life of quietly devoted grassroots organizing. And why should she have? Other people feel a calling for that

kind of activism and would surely be better at it. Besides, Femme and all the talking Royalle did about it expanded the business of hedonism in positive ways. Feminist and queer and other alt porn exists, after all, and some of its makers acknowledge Royalle as its godmother. There's more of it now, because there's more of every kind of porn, and alongside all the Internet-enabled consolidation of the industry, there has also been a kind of democratization, which includes the world of OnlyFans and the like. As the feminist scholar Heather Berg makes clear in "Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism" (2021), a study based on interviews with contemporary performers in the trade, these platforms are, in the usual way, a mixed bag: some people reap bigger rewards while others struggle with more gig-work drudgery and burdensome brand maintenance. But it also means that porn is no longer solely in the hands of producers with financing; now anyone can make and distribute it. Among the results, she says, has been a lot more queer and feminist content. That would have pleased Royalle. No, she didn't rebuild the industry in her image. But she—along with writers and performers such as Susie Bright, Nina Hartley, and Annie Sprinkle—did help make sure that feminist porn was no longer regarded as a punch line or a paradox.

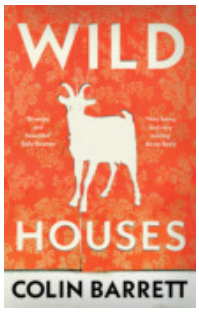
In her search for self-understanding, Royalle seems to have arrived at sure knowledge of one thing: what she wanted sexually. For a while, in the history of porn, this knowledge turned out to be something she could share with a fairly wide audience. She could push back, successfully, against what the writer Maggie Nelson calls our "culture's dirty work of rendering female desire imperceptible, irrelevant, or impugning." During one of the talk shows that Royalle appeared on to promote Femme, a young blond woman in the studio audience stood up and said, "Where do you go to find these movies? I've never heard of these movies, but I sure would love to see one!" Then an older Black woman wearing glasses—she might have been a church lady—stood up, too. On national TV, she told everybody where *she* got Royalle's films: at a mall in Kalamazoo. The audience laughed and whooped. Royalle looked delighted. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

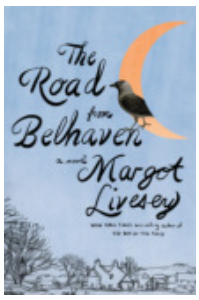
Errand Into the Maze, *by Deborah Jowitt (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. This astute biography, by a veteran *Village Voice* critic, traces the long career of Martha Graham, a choreographer who became one of the major figures of twentieth-century modernism. Born in 1894 in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, Graham came of age in an era when Americans mainly thought of dance as entertainment, a conception that she helped change through such groundbreaking pieces as "Primitive Mysteries" and "Appalachian Spring." While detailing many of Graham's romantic and artistic collaborations, Jowitt focusses on how Graham approached her work—as a performer, a choreographer, and a teacher—with a philosophical rigor that expanded the expressive possibilities of movement and established a uniquely American idiom.



A Map of Future Ruins, *by Lauren Markham (Riverhead)*. In 2020, a fire broke out at a refugee camp in the town of Moria, on the Greek island of Lesbos, displacing thousands. In this finely woven meditation on "belonging, exclusion, and whiteness," Markham, a Greek American journalist, travels to Greece to investigate the fire and its aftermath, including the conviction of six young Afghan asylum seekers. Her thoughts on the case—she ultimately finds it to be specious—mingle with gleanings from visits to locales central to her family's history. "Every map is the product of a cartographer with allegiances," she writes, eventually concluding that confronting the contemporary migration system's injustices requires critically evaluating migrations of the past and the historical narratives about them.



Wild Houses, *by Colin Barrett (Grove)*. In the opening chapter of this short, deftly written novel, two roughnecks in the employ of an Irish drug dealer abduct a teen-age boy named Doll English, hoping to extract repayment of a debt owed by Doll's older brother. Doll is held at a remote safe house owned by a man who is mourning his deceased mother, while Doll's girlfriend frantically searches for him. The kidnapping serves as a binding device, bringing together a small, carefully drawn cast of characters under unusual, high-pressure circumstances. The release of that pressure is sometimes violent, but it is also revelatory: Barrett is less concerned with suspense than with the ways in which people negotiate "that razor-thin border separating the possible from the actual."



The Road from Belhaven, *by Margot Livesey (Knopf)*. This novel follows Lizzie Craig, a young clairvoyant who lives on a farm with her grandparents in nineteenth-century Scotland. At first, Lizzie prays to be free of her "pictures," as she foretells traumatic incidents that she has no power to change, but later she tries to harness her talent to see her own future. When Lizzie becomes enraptured by a young man from Glasgow, her grandmother warns that Lizzie's choice of partner could alter her "road in life," and Lizzie's navigation of the boundary between girlhood and adulthood becomes more urgent. Inspired by the author's mother, the novel gracefully evokes the magic and mystery of the rural world and the vitality and harshness of city life.

BOOKS

THE ENABLERS

Hitler didn't grab power; he was given it.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

Establishment maneuverers planned to use the Nazi leader for their own purposes.

Hitler is so fully imagined a subject—so obsessively present on our televisions and in our bookstores—that to reimagine him seems pointless. As with the Hollywood fascination with Charles Manson, speculative curiosity gives retrospective glamour to evil. Hitler created a world in which women were transported with their children for days in closed train cars and then had to watch those children die alongside them, naked, gasping for breath in a gas chamber. To ask whether the man responsible for this was motivated by *reading* Oswald Spengler or merely by *meeting* him seems to attribute too much complexity of purpose to him, not to mention posthumous dignity. Yet allowing the specifics of his ascent to be clouded by disdain is not much better than allowing his memory to be ennobled by mystery.

So the historian Timothy W. Ryback's choice to make his new book, "Takeover: Hitler's Final Rise to Power" (Knopf), an aggressively specific chronicle of a single year, 1932, seems a wise, even an inspired one. Ryback details, week by week, day by day, and sometimes hour by hour, how a country with a functional, if flawed, democratic machinery handed absolute power over to someone who could never claim a majority in an actual election and whom the entire conservative political class regarded as a chaotic clown with a violent following. Ryback shows how major players thought they could find some ulterior advantage in managing him. Each was sure that, after the passing of a brief storm cloud, so obviously overloaded that it had to expend itself, they would emerge in possession of power. The corporate bosses thought that, if you looked past the strutting and the performative antisemitism, you had someone who would protect your money. Communist ideologues thought that, if you peered deeply enough *into* the strutting and the performative antisemitism, you could spy the pattern of a popular revolution. The decent right thought that he was too obviously deranged to remain in power long, and the decent left, tempered by earlier fights against different enemies, thought that, if they forcibly stuck to the rule of law, then the law would somehow by itself entrap a lawless leader. In a now familiar paradox, the rational forces stuck to magical thinking, while the irrational ones were more logical, parsing the brute equations of power. And so the storm never passed. In a way, it still has not.

Ryback's story begins soon after Hitler's very incomplete victory in the Weimar Republic's parliamentary elections of July, 1932. Hitler's party, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (its German initials were N.S.D.A.P.), emerged with thirty-seven per cent of the vote, and two hundred and thirty out of six hundred and eight seats in the Reichstag, the German parliament—substantially ahead of any of its rivals. In the normal course of events, this would have led the aging warrior Paul von Hindenburg, Germany's President, to appoint Hitler Chancellor. The equivalent of Prime Minister in other parliamentary systems, the Chancellor was meant to answer to his party, to the Reichstag, and to the President, who appointed him and who could remove him. Yet both Hindenburg and the sitting Chancellor, Franz von Papen, had been firm never-Hitler men, and naïvely entreated Hitler to recognize his own unsuitability for the role.

The N.S.D.A.P. had been in existence since right after the Great War, as one of many *völkisch,* or populist, groups; its label, by including "national" and "socialist," was intended to appeal to both right-wing nationalists and left-wing socialists, who were thought to share a common enemy: the élite class of Jewish bankers who, they said, manipulated Germany behind the scenes

UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE / GETTY

and had been responsible for the German surrender. The Nazis, as they were called—a put-down made into a popular label, like "Impressionists"—began as one of many fringe and populist antisemitic groups in Germany, including the Thule Society, which was filled with bizarre pre-QAnon conspiracy adepts. Hitler, an Austrian corporal with a toothbrush mustache (when Charlie Chaplin first saw him in newsreels, he assumed Hitler was aping his Little Tramp character), had seized control of the Party in 1921. Then a failed attempt at a putsch in Munich, in 1923, left him in prison, but with many comforts, much respect, and paper and time with which to write his memoir, "Mein Kampf." He reëmerged as the leader of all the nationalists fighting for election, with an accompanying paramilitary organization, the Sturmabteilung (S.A.), under the direction of the more or less openly homosexual Ernst Röhm, and a press office, under the direction of Joseph Goebbels. (In the American style, the press office recognized the political significance of the era's new technology and social media, exploiting sound recordings, newsreels, and radio, and even having Hitler campaign by airplane.) Hitler's plans were deliberately ambiguous, but his purposes were not. Ever since his unsuccessful putsch in Munich, he had, Ryback writes, "been driven by a single ambition: to destroy the political system that he held responsible for the myriad ills plaguing the German people."

Ryback skips past the underlying mechanics of the July, 1932, election on the way to his real subject—Hitler's manipulation of the conservative politicians and tycoons who thought that they were manipulating him—but there's a notable academic literature on what actually happened when Germans voted that summer. The political scientists and historians who study it tell us that the election was a "normal" one, in the sense that the behavior of groups and subgroups proceeded in the usual way, responding more to the perception of political interests than to some convulsions of apocalyptic feeling.

The popular picture of the decline of the Weimar Republic—in which hyperinflation produced mass unemployment, which produced an unstoppable wave of fascism—is far from the truth. The hyperinflation had ended in 1923, and the period right afterward, in the mid-twenties, was, in Germany as elsewhere, golden. The financial crash of 1929 certainly energized the parties of the far left and the far right. Still, the results of the July, 1932, election weren't obviously catastrophic. The Nazis came out as the largest single party, but both Hitler and Goebbels were bitterly disappointed by their standing. The unemployed actually opposed Hitler and voted en masse for the parties of the left. Hitler won the support of self-employed people, who were in decent economic shape but felt that their lives and livelihoods were threatened; of rural Protestant voters; and of domestic workers (still a sizable group), perhaps because they felt unsafe outside a rigid hierarchy. What was once called the petite bourgeoisie, then, was key to his support—not people feeling the brunt of economic precarity but people feeling the possibility of it. Having nothing to fear but fear itself is having something significant to fear.

It was indeed a "normal" election in that respect, responding not least to the outburst of "normal" politics with which Hitler had littered his program: he had, in the months beforehand, damped down his usual ranting about Jews and bankers and moneyed élites and the rest. He had recorded a widely distributed phonograph album (the era's equivalent of a podcast) designed to make him seem, well, Chancellor-ish. He emphasized agricultural support and a return to better times, aiming, as Ryback writes, "to bridge divides of class and conscience, socialism and nationalism." By the strange alchemy of demagoguery, a brief visit to the surface of sanity annulled years and years of crazy.

The Germans were voting, in the absent-minded way of democratic voters everywhere, for easy reassurances, for stability, with classes siding against their historical enemies. They weren't wild-eyed nationalists voting for a millennial authoritarian regime that would rule forever and restore Germany to glory, and, certainly, they weren't voting for an apocalyptic nightmare that would leave tens of millions of people dead and the cities of Germany destroyed. They were voting for specific programs that they thought would benefit them, and for a year's insurance against the people they feared.

Ryback spends most of his time with two pillars of respectable conservative Germany, General Kurt von Schleicher and the right-wing media magnate Alfred Hugenberg. Utterly contemptuous of Hitler as a lazy buffoon—he didn't wake up until eleven most mornings and spent much of his time watching and talking about movies—the two men still hated the Communists and even the center-left Social Democrats more than they did anyone on the right, and they spent most of 1932 and 1933 scheming to use Hitler as a stalking horse for their own ambitions.

Schleicher is perhaps first among Ryback's too-clever-for-their-own-good villains, and the book presents a piercingly novelistic picture of him. Though in some ways a classic Prussian militarist, Schleicher, like so many of the German upper classes, was also a cultivated and cosmopolitan bon vivant, whom the well-connected journalist and diarist Bella Fromm called "a man of almost irresistible charm." He was a character out of a Jean Renoir film, the regretful Junker caught in modern times. He had no illusions about Hitler ("What am I to do with that psychopath?" he said after hearing about his behavior), but, infinitely ambitious, he thought that Hitler's call for strongman rule might awaken the German people to the need for a *real* strongman, i.e., Schleicher. Ryback tells us that Schleicher had a strategy he dubbed the *Zähmungsprozess*, or "taming process," which was meant to sideline the radicals of the Nazi Party and bring the movement into mainstream politics. He publicly commended Hitler as a "modest, orderly man who only wants what is best" and who would follow the rule of law. He praised Hitler's paramilitary troops, too, defending them against press reports of street violence. In fact, as Ryback explains, the game plan was to have the Brown Shirts crush the forces of the left—and then to have the regular German Army crush the Brown Shirts.

Schleicher imagined himself a master manipulator of men and causes. He liked to play with a menagerie of glass animal figurines on his desk, leaving the

impression that lesser beings were mere toys to be handled. In June of 1932, he prevailed on Hindenburg to give the Chancellorship to Papen, a weak politician widely viewed as Schleicher's puppet; Papen, in turn, installed Schleicher as minister of defense. Then they dissolved the Reichstag and held those July elections which, predictably, gave the Nazis a big boost.

Ryback spends many mordant pages tracking Schleicher's whirling-dervish intrigues, as he tried to realize his fantasy of the *Zähmungsprozess.* Many of these involved schemes shared with the patriotic and staunchly anti-Nazi General Kurt von Hammerstein-Equord (familiar to viewers of "Babylon Berlin" as Major General Seegers). Hammerstein was one of the few German officers to fully grasp Hitler's real nature. At a meeting with Hitler in the spring of 1932, Hammerstein told him bluntly, "Herr Hitler, if you achieve power legally, that would be fine with me. If the circumstances are different, I will use arms." He later felt reassured when Hindenburg intimated that, if the Nazi paramilitary troops acted, he could order the Army to fire on them.

Yet Hammerstein remained impotent. At various moments, Schleicher, as the minister of defense, entertained what was in effect a plan for imposing martial law with himself in charge and Hammerstein at his side. In retrospect, it was the last hope of protecting the republic from Hitler—but after President Hindenburg rejected it, not out of democratic misgivings but out of suspicion of Schleicher's purposes, Hammerstein, an essentially tragic figure, was unable to act alone. He suffered from a malady found among decent military men suddenly thrust into positions of political power: his scruples were at odds with his habits of deference to hierarchy. Generals became generals by learning to take orders before they learned how to give them. Hammerstein hated Hitler, but he waited for someone else of impeccable authority to give a clear direction before he would act. (He went on waiting right through the war, as part of the equally impotent military nexus that wanted Hitler dead but, until it was too late, lacked the will to kill him.)

The extra-parliamentary actions that were fleetingly contemplated in the months after the election—a war in the streets, or, more likely, a civil confrontation leading to a military coup—seemed horrific. The trouble, unknowable to the people of the time, is that, since what did happen is the worst thing that has ever happened, *any* alternative would have been less horrific. One wants to shout to Hammerstein and his cohorts, Go ahead, take over the government! Arrest Hitler and his henchmen, rule for a few years, and then try again. It won't be as bad as what happens next. But, of course, they cannot hear us. They couldn't have heard us then.

Ryback's gift for detail joins with a nice feeling for the black comedy of the period. He makes much sport of the attempts by foreign journalists resident in Germany, particularly the New York *Times'* Frederick T. Birchall, to normalize the Nazi ascent—with Birchall continually assuring his readers that Hitler, an out-of-his-depth simpleton, was not the threat he seemed to be, and that the other conservatives were far more potent in their political maneuvering. When Papen made a speech denying that Hitler's paramilitary forces represented "the German nation," Birchall wrote that the speech "contained dynamite enough to change completely the political situation in the Reich." On another occasion, Birchall wrote that "the Hitlerites" were deluded to think they "hold the best cards"; there was every reason to think that "the big cards, the ones that will really decide

the game," were in the hands of people such as Papen, Hindenburg, and, "above all," Schleicher.

Ryback, focussing on the self-entrapped German conservatives, generally avoids the question that seems most obvious to a contemporary reader: Why was a coalition between the moderate-left Social Democrats and the conservative but far from Nazified Catholic Centrists never even seriously attempted? Given that Hitler had repeatedly vowed to use the democratic process in order to destroy democracy, why did the people committed to democracy let him do it?

Many historians have jousted with this question, but perhaps the most piercing account remains an early one, written less than a decade after the war by the émigré German scholar Lewis Edinger, who had known the leaders of the Social Democrats well and consulted them directly—the ones who had survived, that is—for his study. His conclusion was that they simply "trusted that constitutional processes and the return of reason and fair play would assure the survival of the Weimar Republic and its chief supporters." The Social Democratic leadership had become a gerontocracy, out of touch with the generational changes beneath them. The top Social Democratic leaders were, on average, two decades older than their Nazi counterparts.

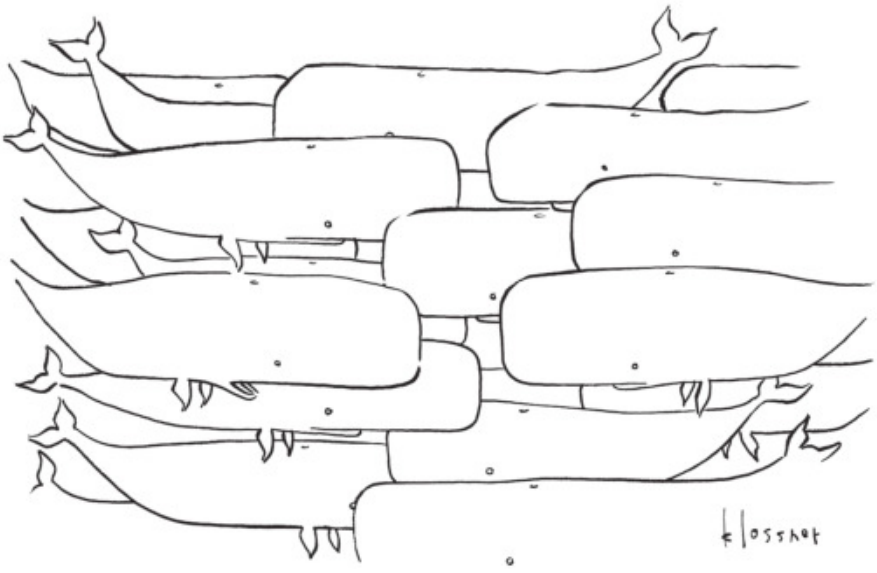
Worse, the Social Democrats remained in the grip of a long struggle with Bismarckian nationalism, which, however oppressive it might have been, still operated with a broad idea of legitimacy and the rule of law. The institutional procedures of parliamentarianism had always seen the Social Democrats through—why would those procedures not continue to protect them? In a battle between demagoguery and democracy, surely democracy had the advantage. Edinger writes that Karl Kautsky, among the most eminent of the Party's theorists, believed that after the election Hitler's supporters would realize he was incapable of fulfilling his promises and drift away.

The Social Democrats may have been hobbled, too, by their commitment to team leadership—which meant that no single charismatic individual represented them. Proceduralists and institutionalists by temperament and training, they were, as Edinger demonstrates, unable to imagine the nature of their adversary. They acceded to Hitler's ascent with the belief that by respecting the rules themselves they would encourage the other side to play by them as well. Even after Hitler consolidated his power, he was seen to have secured the Chancellorship by constitutional means. Edinger quotes Arnold Brecht, a fellow exiled statesman: "To rise against him on the first night would make the rebels the technical violators of the Con-

stitution that they wanted to defend."

Meanwhile, the centrist Catholics—whom Hitler shrewdly recognized as his most formidable potential adversaries—were handicapped in any desire to join with the Democratic Socialists by their fear of the Communists. Though the Communists had previously made various alliances of convenience with the Social Democrats, by 1932 they were tightly controlled by Stalin, who had ordered them to depict the Social Democrats as being as great a threat to the working class as Hitler.

And, when a rumor spread that Hitler had once spat out a Communion Host, it only made him more popular among Catholics, since it called attention to his Catholic upbringing. Indeed, most attempts to highlight Hitler's personal depravities (including his possibly sexual relationship with his niece Geli, which was no secret in the press of the time; her apparent suicide, less than a year before the election, had been a tabloid scandal) made him more popular. In any case, Hitler was skilled at reassuring the Catholic center, promising to be "the strong protector of Christianity as the basis of our common moral order."



"That's what I hate about whale parties—no room to dance and they always run out of krill."

• •

Hitler's hatred of parliamentary democracy, even more than his hatred of Jews, was central to his identity, Ryback emphasizes. Antisemitism was a regular feature of populist politics in the region: Hitler had learned much of it in his youth from the Vienna mayor Karl Lueger. But Lueger was a genuine populist democrat, who brought universal male suffrage to the city. Hitler's originality lay elsewhere. "Unlike Hitler's anti-Semitism, a toxic brew of pseudoscientific readings and malignant mentoring, Hitler's hatred of the Weimar Republic was the result of personal observation of political processes," Ryback writes. "He hated the haggling and compromise of coalition politics inherent in multiparty political systems."

Second only to Schleicher in Ryback's accounting of Hitler's establishment enablers is the media magnate Alfred Hugenberg. The owner of the country's leading film studio and of the national news service, which supplied some sixteen hundred newspapers, he was far from an admirer. He regarded Hitler as manic and unreliable but found him essential for the furtherance of their common program, and was in and out of political alliance with him during the crucial year.

Hugenberg had begun constructing his media empire in the late nineteenteens, in response to what he saw as the bias against conservatives in much of the German press, and he shared Hitler's hatred of democracy and of the Jews. But he thought of himself as a much more sophisticated player, and intended to use his control of modern media in pursuit of what he called a *Katastrophenpolitik*—a "catastrophe politics" of cultural warfare, in which the strategy, Ryback says, was to "flood the public space with inflammatory news stories, half-truths, rumors, and outright lies." The aim was to polarize the public, and to crater anything like consensus. Hugenberg gave Hitler money as well as publicity, but Hugenberg had his own political ambitions (somewhat undermined by a personal aura described by his nickname, der Hamster) and his own party, and Hitler was furiously jealous of the spotlight. While giving Hitler support in his media—a support sometimes interrupted by impatience—Hugenberg urged him to act rationally and settle for Nazi positions in the cabinet if he could not have the Chancellorship.

What strengthened the Nazis throughout the conspiratorial maneuverings of the period was certainly not any great display of discipline. The Nazi movement was a chaotic mess of struggling in-groups who feared and despised one another. Hitler rightly mistrusted the loyalty even of his chief lieutenant, Gregor Strasser, who fell on the "socialist" side of the National Socialists label. The members of the S.A., the Storm Troopers, meanwhile, were loyal mainly to their own leader, Ernst Röhm, and embarrassed Hitler with their run of sexual scandals. The N.S.D.A.P. was a hive of internal antipathies that could resolve only in violence—a condition that would endure to the last weeks of the war, when, standing amid the ruins of Germany, Hitler was enraged to discover that Heinrich Himmler was trying to negotiate a separate peace with the Western Allies.

The strength of the Nazis lay, rather, in the curiously enclosed and benumbed character of their leader. Hitler was impossible to discourage, not because he ran an efficient machine but because he was immune to the normal human impediments to absolute power: shame, calculation, or even a desire to see a particular political program put in place. Hindenburg, knowing of Hitler's genuinely courageous military service in the Great War, appealed in their meetings

to his patriotism, his love of the Fatherland. But Hitler, an Austrian who did not receive German citizenship until shortly before the 1932 election, did not love the Fatherland. He ran on the hydrogen fuel of pure hatred. He did not want power in order to implement a program; he wanted power in order to realize his pain. A fascinating and once classified document, prepared for the precursor of the C.I.A., the O.S.S., by the psychoanalyst Walter Langer, used first-person accounts to gauge the scale of Hitler's narcissism: "It may be of interest to note at this time that of all the titles that Hitler might have chosen for himself he is content with the simple one of 'Fuehrer.' To him this title is the greatest of them all. He has spent his life searching for a person worthy of the role but was unable to find one until he discovered himself." Or, as the acute Hungarian American historian John Lukacs, who spent a lifetime studying Hitler's psychology, observed, "His hatred for his opponents was both stronger and less abstract than was his love for his people. That was (and remains) a distinguishing mark of the mind of every extreme nationalist."

In November of 1932, one more Reichstag election was held. Once again, it was a bitter disappointment to Hitler and Goebbels—"a disaster," as Goebbels declared on Election Night. (An earlier Presidential election had also reaffirmed Hindenburg over the Hitler movement.) The Nazi wave that everyone had expected failed to materialize. The Nazis lost seats, and, once again, they could not crack fifty per cent. The *Times* explained that the Hitler movement had passed its high-water mark, and that "the country is getting tired of the Nazis." Everywhere, Ryback says, the cartoonists and editorialists delighted in Hitler's discomfiture. One cartoonist showed him presiding over a graveyard of swastikas. In December of 1932, having lost three elections in a row, Hitler seemed to be finished.

The subsequent maneuverings are as dispiriting to read about as they are exhausting to follow. Basically, Schleicher conspired to have Papen fired as Chancellor by Hindenburg and replaced by himself. He calculated that he could cleave Gregor Strasser and the more respectable elements of the Nazis from Hitler, form a coalition with them, and leave Hitler on the outside looking in. But Papen, a small man in everything except his taste for revenge, turned on Schleicher in a rage and went directly to Hitler, proposing, despite his earlier never-Hitler views, that they form their own coalition. Schleicher's plan to spirit Strasser away from Hitler and break the Nazi Party in two then stumbled on the reality that the real base of the Party was fanatically loyal only to its leader—and Strasser, knowing this, refused to leave the Party, even as he conspired with Schleicher to undermine it.

Then, in mid-January, a small regional election in Lipperland took place. Though the results were again disappointing for Hitler and Goebbels—the National Socialist German Workers' Party still hadn't surmounted the fifty-per-cent mark—they managed to sell the election as a kind of triumph. At Party meetings, Hitler denounced Strasser. The idea, much beloved by Schleicher and his allies, of breaking a Strasser wing of the Party off from Hitler became obviously impossible.

Hindenburg, in his mid-eighties and growing weak, became fed up with Schleicher's Machiavellian stratagems and dispensed with him as Chancellor. Papen, dismissed not long before, was received by the President. He promised that he could form a working majority in the Reichstag by simple means: Hindenburg should go ahead and appoint Hitler Chancellor. Hitler, he explained, had made significant "concessions," and could be controlled. He would want only the Chancellorship, and not more seats in the cabinet. What could go wrong? "You mean to tell me I have the unpleasant task of appointing this Hitler as the next Chancellor?" Hindenburg reportedly asked. He did. The conservative strategists celebrated their victory. "So, we box Hitler in," Hugenberg said confidently. Papen crowed, "Within two months, we will have pressed Hitler into a corner so tight that he'll squeak!"

"The big joke on democracy is that it gives its mortal enemies the tools to its own destruction," Goebbels said as the Nazis rose to power—one of those quotes that sound apocryphal but are not. The ultimate fates of Ryback's players are varied, and instructive. Schleicher, the conservative who saw right through Hitler's weakness—who had found a way to entrap him, and then use him against the left—was killed by the S.A. during the Night of the Long Knives, in 1934, when Hitler consolidated his hold over his own movement by murdering his less loyal lieutenants. Strasser and Röhm were murdered then, too. Hitler and Goebbels, of course, died by their own hands in defeat, having left tens of millions of Europeans dead and their country in ruins. But Hugenberg, sidelined during the Third Reich, was exonerated by a denazification court in the years after the war. And Papen, who had ushered Hitler directly into power, was acquitted at Nuremberg; in the nineteen-fifties, he was awarded the highest honorary order of the Catholic Church.

Does history have patterns or merely circumstances and unique contingencies? Certainly, the Germany of 1932 was a place unto itself. The truth, that some cycles may recur but inexactly, is best captured in that fine aphorism "History does not repeat itself, but it sometimes rhymes." Appropriately, no historian is exactly sure who said this: widely credited to Mark Twain, it was more likely first said long after his death.

We see through a glass darkly, as patterns of authoritarian ambition seem to flash before our eyes: the demagogue made strong not by conviction but by being numb to normal human encouragements and admonitions; the aging center left; the media lords who want something like what the demagogue wants but in the end are controlled by him; the political maneuverers who think they can outwit the demagogue; the resistance and sudden surrender. Democracy doesn't die in darkness. It dies in bright midafternoon light, where politicians fall back on familiarities and make faint offers to authoritarians and say a firm and final no—and then wake up a few days later and say, Well, maybe this time, it might all work out, and look at the other side! Precise circumstances never repeat, yet shapes and patterns so often recur. In history, it's true, the same thing never happens twice. But the same things do. ♦

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ON AND OFF THE MENU

YOU CAN'T SIT WITH US

Why New York restaurants are going members-only.

BY HANNAH GOLDFIELD

Exclusive spots such as 4 Charles and Rao's hold tables for "standing guests."

On a recent Tuesday evening at 4 Charles Prime Rib, in the West Village, shortly after my party of four had settled in for dinner, a man who bore the gentle air of owning the place arrived at a neighboring table. As our server delivered our cocktails, she gestured at him and said, with a wink, "This is Gary. He's a regular. I'm so sorry you have to sit next to him. Let me know if you want me to put up a curtain to block him out." Everyone laughed. "Gary's full of wisdom," the maître d' added as he passed by. Gary—round but trim, with a shaved, shiny pate and a distinct Long Island accent—smirked and said, "Yeah, like, drink a Martini if you're driving, and tequila if you're not."

Gary is more than a regular at 4 Charles; he's one of only a few people who can get a table there at all. The restaurant is ostensibly open to the public, but if you're not Gary—or Taylor Swift, whom Gary told me he'd been seated next to a few nights prior—you're probably not getting in. According to more than one thread on Reddit, your chances of booking a reservation even the instant a batch of them is released on Resy, at 9 A.M. each day, are slim to none. By the restaurant's calculations, you'd be competing with anywhere from nine hundred to fifteen hundred other hopefuls. Moreover, nearly half the tables in the very small dining room are already reserved, for "standing guests," like Gary.

Gary has a reservation every Friday, but he likes to pop in on Monday or Tuesday, too—"so they don't forget about me," he said. "And to annoy them." That he has the appetite for this is a feat. The menu at 4 Charles is an extravagant appeal to one's inner child, which is to say that it could have been drawn up by Richie Rich. The baked potatoes are fully loaded, crowned with glistening lardons of maple-glazed bacon; the enormous hot-fudge sundae comes surrounded by piles of candy. Our server suggested a cheeseburger for the table, as a mid-course between sizzling shrimp scampi and a bone-in rib eye, and when it arrived she put on a white glove to cut it carefully into quarters.

At the end of the meal, Gary sent over an off-menu dessert of his own design: pie on pie, a slice of cartoonishly tall lemon-meringue balanced atop a slice of chocolate-cream. As the owner and operator of a trucking business, he explained, he needs an impressive place to bring clients. When I asked him if he'd been to Rao's, in East Harlem, New York's most famous restaurant-that's-actually-a-club, he waved his hand. "My clients can get themselves into Rao's," he said. "*This* is the new Rao's."

I got myself into Rao's a few weeks later, with the help of a young chef and restaurateur named Max Chodorow. For Chodorow, whose father is the restaurateur Jeffrey Chodorow, known for the bygone hot spots Asia de Cuba and China Grill, getting a table at Rao's is fairly easy. He just has to check in with Carol Nelson, a family friend who has held a standing reservation for decades: every Tuesday, she has the first booth on the left, which is hung with her photograph. When she can't use it herself, she donates it to be auctioned off for charity—it can fetch tens of thousands of dollars—or offers it to a friend.

I'd asked Chodorow and Ashwin Deshmukh, his partner in a Manhattan restaurant called Jean's, to bring me to Rao's to discuss an observation of mine. The question I'm asked most frequently, as someone who writes about restaurants, is "Where should I eat?" A close second is "Why is it so hard to

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JASON FULFORD AND TAMARA SHOPSIN

make a reservation?" Every generation of New York restaurants includes a few establishments whose tables are notoriously elusive, and I'd long seen those places—say, Carbone or the Polo Bar—as rarities. But in recent years a growing number of restaurants seemed to shift toward the Rao's model, effectively functioning as private clubs.

Suddenly, getting into any place with even a little buzz required knowing someone, or applying to use Dorsia, an app that grants seats to users who agree to pay a large, nonrefundable sum toward each bill. (It shares a name with the fictional, ultra-exclusive restaurant in "American Psycho.") A week or so before my night at Rao's, I'd gone to Frog Club, the impossible reservation du jour, which had just opened in the space formerly occupied by the infamous speakeasy Chumley's. The only way to get a table was to e-mail an address that has since been removed from the restaurant's Web site; when I arrived, a bouncer stationed outside the door placed branded stickers over my phone camera. I'd also attended a birthday dinner at Prune, Gabrielle Hamilton's beloved East Village restaurant, which has been closed to the public since the start of the pandemic but is, for now, available for private parties at Hamilton's discretion. (She pours the champagne towers herself.)

"The best reason to run a functionally private restaurant in New York is also the saddest reason," Deshmukh told me, as we ate seafood salad and roasted sweet peppers strewn with golden raisins and pine nuts. In the face of inflation and exorbitant rents, "it's easier to focus on the six hundred people who can pay your bills than on serving the masses." When your tables are reserved only by regulars, he added, "the number of no-shows goes to zero." Plus, "you can involve your diners in the conspiracy of it all, at a premium. 'This fresco olive oil? It's just for you, because you are such a good customer. That's fifty dollars, please!'" (A few weeks later, the *Times* ran a story alleging that Deshmukh has made a habit of fleecing investors and misrepresenting himself in business dealings; he told me, without getting into specifics, that many of the accusations are untrue.)

Some diners are proving eager to pony up for the privilege of spending more money. A new dining rewards system called Blackbird, created by Ben Leventhal, one of Resy's founders, allows users to open a "house account" at certain restaurants, essentially prepaying for meals. Last year, Major Food Group, the consortium behind Carbone, opened ZZ's Club in Hudson Yards, with memberships starting at thirty thousand dollars, plus ten thousand in annual dues. One of the club's restaurants is Carbone Privato, a souped-up version of the original, which I visited as a guest. Amid a circus of tableside preparations—servers theatrically shaking Martinis and flambéing cherries—diners sized up one another, eyes darting around the room suspiciously. An especially anointed few slunk over to the Founders' Room, where a "culinary concierge" will arrange for the kitchen to prepare anything a member desires; recent requests, according to the club's director, have included a faithful re-creation of a Pizza Hut pie.

Chodorow is wary of club-ifying his own businesses, despite the clear financial incentives. "The premise is so uninteresting to me—to go hang out with the same three hundred rich people for the next ten years?" he told me, at Rao's. It was a funny thing to say, given where we were, but part of that restaurant's appeal is a lack of conspicuous status markers. The dining room is defiantly unpolished; there were Christmas decorations still strung above the bar in February. Our server, sitting backward on a chair that he'd pulled up to our table, recited the family-style menu from memory, then probed our order with expert collegiality. Were we sure we wanted that much mozzarella? Instead of a second white pasta, how about one with red sauce? When someone selected "My Girl," by the Temptations, from the digital jukebox, almost everyone sang along.

It was an atmosphere I've hardly ever encountered in New York's most vaunted dining rooms—more "When you're here, you're family" than "How did *you* get in?" But I'd found something similar at an acclaimed members-only restaurant called Palizzi Social Club, in a row house on a residential block in South Philly. Before the chef Joey Baldino took it over, in 2016, Palizzi went by its full name, Filippo Palizzi Societa di Mutuo Soccorso di Vasto. It was founded in 1918, as an all-purpose gathering place, by a group of Italian immigrants from a small town in Abruzzo. Baldino wanted to turn the Societa into a more conventional restaurant, but he was moved to honor its history. He kept it private while also making it less exclusive, capping the number of memberships but otherwise offering them to anyone who wanted one, for just twenty dollars each.

I had dinner there recently with a big group of friends, about half of whom were members. Standing outside, I felt vaguely like I was doing something clandestine. The glass front door opened onto an empty foyer that glowed red; past that was another door, outfitted with a speakeasy-style window the size of a mail slot, for a bouncer to peer through. I'd been advised to bring a fat wad of cash—like Rao's, Palizzi does not accept credit cards—and I was conscious of my wallet's unusual bulge.

Inside, the mood was relaxed and convivial. Details that might have felt gimmicky somewhere else—a black-and-white checkered floor, a vintage cigarette machine by the bar, servers dressed in Rat Pack-era uniforms (a neighborhood singer who specializes in Frank Sinatra performs regularly)—read as charming here. The clientele seemed to represent the neighborhood, dressed casually and ranging from Zoomers to boomers. We had barely looked at the menu before plates of food began to arrive: escarole and beans; lollipop lamb chops; spaghetti with blue crab. To my surprise, my favorite was the calamari and peas, an old family recipe of Baldino's. The dish, a slightly soupy mix of canned sweet peas, tender rings of squid, and mini pasta shells, showered in Pecorino, struck me as rare but not rarefied—a privilege worth preserving. ♦

Block That Metaphor!

From the Times.

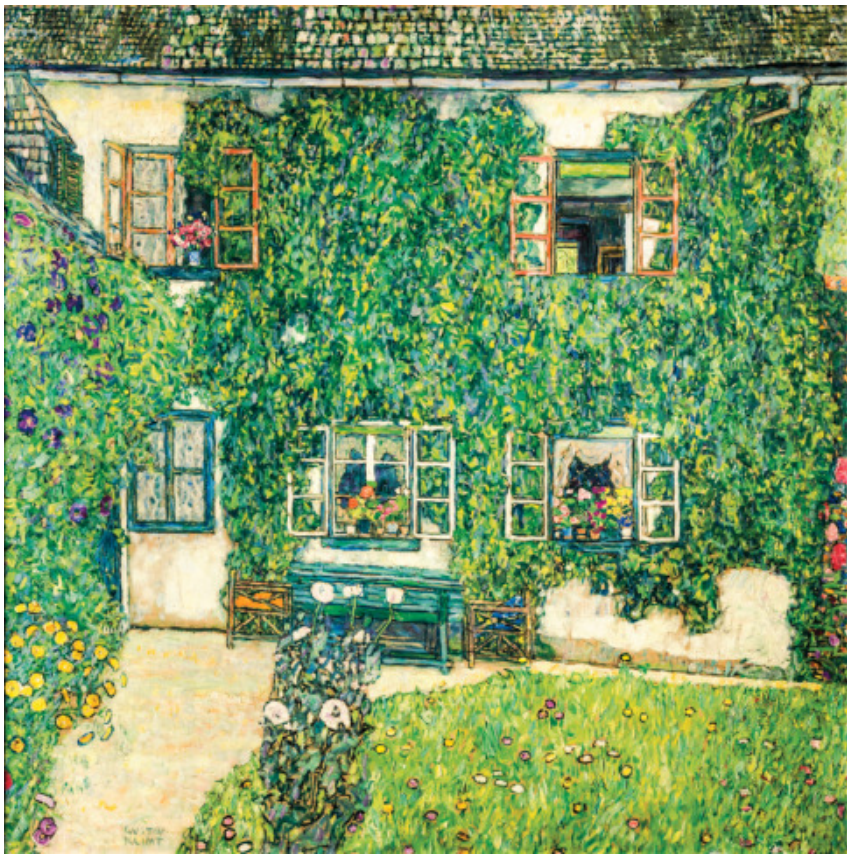
It's possible that the bungled decisions that led to two prolonged strikes—the most vigorous recent attempt by studio heads to shoot themselves in the foot—created one unanticipated benefit, a green shoot of improbable hope: a serious delay in the completion of giant franchise movies.

THE ART WORLD

ALL THAT GLITTERS

The showmanship of Gustav Klimt.

BY JACKSON ARN



"Forester's House in Weissenbach II (Garden)" (1914), one of Klimt's landscapes.

The art of Gustav Klimt makes me feel as though I am face to face with God, if God is a charming, faintly trashy type who leers more than he enlightens and seems oddly desperate for my approval. Klimt's mysticism is a kind of busy stagecraft, all confetti cannons and angels dangling from ropes. It drove people wild a hundred and twenty-five years ago and still does, though a closer look at his path from academic painter to Viennese radical to professional heiress-glorifier suggests a man stuck between nineteenth- and twentieth-century attitudes, and all the more fascinating for it. In a photograph taken around 1908, a decade before his death, he wears a floor-length smock and points his big, wolfish head at the darkness, arms crossed. He looks like a crook disguised as a priest, the better to get his way.

A version of the smock, and many of the paintings he finished while wearing it, can be found at "Klimt Landscapes," the Neue Galerie's second major show since closing for renovations last summer. The theme is a head-scratcher: who thinks of Klimt, with his gold leaf and gorgeous women, as a painter of *nature*? Only a small fraction of the works here qualify as landscapes, and many of these were completed toward the end of Klimt's life, when he was between portraits of wealthy sitters, summering in the Austrian countryside and—the show stresses this point—painting for his own pleasure. When artists create for themselves, we tend to assume that the results are more personal, but the rule seems iffier in the case of this taciturn yet resolutely public figure, who may have been most himself when he had spectators and a trunkful of props to wow them with.

He was born in 1862, in the village of Baumgarten. Gold was in his blood—his father was a skilled engraver of it—but the family was always on the brink of poverty. As a scholarship kid at Vienna's School of Arts and Crafts, Klimt impressed his teachers and prepared for a life spent painting big, history-burnishing murals for the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A scarily perfect drawing of a male nude, done the year he turned eighteen, suggests both the conventional career that was his for the taking and, in subtler ways, the one he took. The figure, which has been outlined with great care and shaded into lifelikeness, reclines on a bed, but since the bed is more crudely drawn than the rest, he almost seems to be drifting through nothingness. It is hard to say if his right leg is tensed or slack, if this is a pose or the absence of one.

Few aesthetic movements—interesting ones, anyway—can be neatly defined. With the Vienna Secession, the esteemed group that Klimt co-founded in 1897, it's especially futile: there was no single manifesto, and the entire thing was in pieces in less than a decade. The historian Carl Schorske, in his definitive "Fin-de-Siècle Vienna," described the Secession as an Oedipal snarl, loud but brief, at an older generation of prudes and pedants. It was radical in some ways, and enriched Viennese art with new sexual frankness and proto-modernist flatness, but it also enjoyed support from the liberal Austrian government for a while, and even accepted commissions. How avant-garde, really, is a group that designs postage stamps?

If you knew nothing about the Secession and had only Klimts to consult, you might guess that it was about hair. Whether they depict the stuff or not, his pictures seem to aspire to hair's condition: weightless, undulating, at once realistic and abstract. Take a wispy drawing, from around 1901, of a woman in profile. Notice, first, how much the drawer has unlearned—having mastered the realistic depiction of flesh in his teens, he needed something new—and, second, how plain the woman's head looks compared with what's growing out of

GUSTAV KLIMT / COURTESY NEUE GALERIE NEW YORK; PHOTOGRAPH BY HULYA KOLABAS

it. In Klimt's other work of this era, little is straight and absolutely nothing is heavy, least of all when it's coated in gold. Bright patterns float around bodies, and the bodies flow into each other, liquid even when they're solid.

Does this sound a little silly? It is, when Klimt tries to distort shapes that are too stubbornly fleshy—the enormous thigh in the female nude "Danaë," say, which looks like a thigh, a phallus, and a body rolled into one. Other pictures have a green-screen phonyness: when a woman thrashes around in colorful geometric quicksand, you sense that she's just playacting for her director. T. J. Clark, the most eloquent Klimt hater, thought that he specialized in "the new century's pretend difficulty and 'opacity,' pretend mystery and profundity, pretend eroticism and excess." His art is, sure enough, humorless, albeit in a teen-age way that is kind of funny. What's teen-age about it is the combination of squirming lust with an awkwardness, masked by bravado, about where to go from there: on the rare occasions when a man and a woman meet in these paintings, there may be a flurry of loud shapes but never anything resembling an erotic spark. (Art perhaps echoes life: Klimt reportedly fathered fourteen children but was said to be quite shy.) "The Kiss" is supposed to be an image of two lovers embracing. Having spent some time with the Neue's small, collotype version, from a series produced between 1908 and 1914, I would call it an image of two heads, orbited by a shoulder, some hands, some feet, and an elbow.

Not that all Klimt's work lacks passion. It was a pleasant shock to find that his pictures of women are still genuinely sexy, though the word "genuine" is probably beside the point when we're talking about desire. (With apologies to Clark, isn't all eroticism pretend?) A second shock is that these pictures' sexiness doesn't come from the places you might expect. The erogenous zones aren't breasts or buttocks or even hair; mouths and lazily narrowed eyes bring the real heat. Savor both in a collotype of "Judith I," wherein the beautiful widow almost caresses the head of Holofernes, which, to go by the Biblical tale, she has just separated from his body. Now compare her with the brow-clenching, sword-gripping version painted by Caravaggio. I'm not sure I can imagine Klimt's Judith holding on to a weapon, let alone using one, but I still wouldn't want to cross her. If she looks relaxed, it's only because her power is total—Holofernes has been slain already, and then sliced again for good measure by the picture's right edge. This time, the solemnity doesn't verge on silliness; it pushes all the way through, to new territory. Klimt abstracts without sacrificing his academy-trained eye for the particular, and the result is a breathing, blinking woman who is also a force of nature.

Which brings us, at last, to the landscapes. I've left them for the end, both because the Neue mostly does and because they are far from his most exciting pictures. Their signature motif, going simply by area, is a pointillist carpet of colors, which may signal a cluster of pear trees or a watery reflection à la Monet. But the brightness and flatness that Monet relished for their own sake Klimt can't leave alone—patches of background keep popping up to decode the space, as though abstraction requires some explanation. John Updike wrote that Klimt sought "to banish perspectival depth." Not quite. It's more like he wants to make it disappear in order to conjure it back, to oohs and gasps. In "Forester's House in Weissenbach II (Garden)" (1914), you can see straight through one of the windows, to the other side of the building. It's a witty little detail, but it leaves a slight aftertaste of insecurity: Klimt reminding some imaginary beholder, or maybe just himself, that he's only pretending to paint in a flat manner.

He was, at least, consistent. Even Klimt's landscapes are dazzling, almost nourishing portraits of a maiden half buried in the picture plane, the maiden being Mother Nature. The traditionalism of Viennese art may have held him back, but so did his own hunger to please. He challenged audiences, but not too much. That's better than most of us manage, of course, and who could begrudge him some pretty paintings to remember summer by? At the Neue, they are the finale of a four-decade extravaganza, in which a talented artist removes layer after layer of training but, instead of getting down to the raw and essential, finds himself fully clothed. ♦

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POP MUSIC

WEST SIDE STORY

Ian Munsick brings his Wyoming sound to Nashville.

BY KELEFA SANNEH

Munsick says he sings about "mountains, horses, ranchers, cowboys, coyotes."

Ian Munsick was backstage at the Grand Ole Opry, and he seemed satisfied with what he saw in the dressing-room mirror: a shirt embroidered with roses, jeans secured by a belt buckle the size of a compact disk, long dark hair, a black cowboy hat with an eagle feather tucked into the band. Caroline Munsick, who is both his wife and his manager, provided some extra scrutiny. "Normally it's, like, five hundred dollars for a makeup girl to come in here," she said, corralling a few fugitive strands of his hair. "He gets it for free." She handed him a bolo tie with a black clasp, to replace the turquoise one he had on.

"This is the bolo I gave you," he said.

"I know," she said. "But it looks good with your outfit."

Munsick cinched the black bolo, gathered his band members for a brief prayer, and then headed out to the stage, where four thousand people were waiting. In some sense he was in his element: Munsick is a country singer, and the Grand Ole Opry is a country institution, bringing together stars of varying magnitudes to join in its long-running revue. But part of Munsick's considerable appeal is that he doesn't quite fit in. He has a growing fan base to match his growing catalogue of great songs about being lovesick or homesick or some combination of both. Yet he sings not in a sturdy Southern baritone but in a high, transfixing tenor, which grows even higher when, from time to time, he upshifts into a mournful howl. His cowboy hat, the ultimate country accessory, actually marks him as a Nashville outsider: he grew up in Wyoming, on a ranch, and is preoccupied by the sounds and images of the wild, open West. "A lot of my music is about mountains, horses, ranchers, cowboys, coyotes," he says, and he recently wrote a semi-autobiographical song called "Too Many Trees," about a man who just can't get used to the leafy landscape of Tennessee.

"I hope you like a little Western in your country," Munsick told the crowd at the Grand Ole Opry, and evidently they did like it. Munsick was there to promote his second album, "White Buffalo," which arrived last year and will be reissued, with four new songs, next month. The title song, which uses pastoral language to describe a breakup, has plenty of reverb and scarcely any percussion, and it transforms a romantic complaint into something resembling a spiritual quest. "I need help fixing what she broke / I got a better chance, I know / Of finding a white buffalo," he sings, adding one of his howls, which audience members have been known to try to emulate. At the Opry, the audience wasn't quite howling, but there was a big cheer when Munsick brought out the evening's headliner, a brawny Texas cowboy named Cody Johnson, who has strung together enough hits to become a bona-fide star. Johnson had taken Munsick on the road as his opening act, and had been so impressed by one of Munsick's songs, "Leather," that he recorded it, and named his most recent album after it. In return, Johnson appears on Munsick's current single, "Long Live Cowgirls," which is not (as the title might suggest) a frolicsome celebration but a stately waltz; it has been streamed more than a hundred million times, though it hasn't yet found an audience on country radio, where it has peaked at No. 54. At the Opry, Munsick and Johnson sang it together, after which Munsick submitted to a brief interview with the evening's m.c., who asked him if there was anything

PHOTOGRAPH BY CEDRICK JONES

to be found in Wyoming that couldn't be found in Texas. This was a mischievous question—and maybe, in a room stocked with Cody Johnson fans, a perilous one. Munsick paused, and then smiled. "I'll tell you what Texas has, that Wyoming does not," he said. "City folk."

There is a moment halfway through "The Blues Brothers," the 1980 comedy blockbuster, when our heroes happen onto a roadhouse and look around. They are in Kokomo, Indiana, which is only a few hours' drive from their beloved Chicago but seems much farther. When they ask the bartender what kind of music is typically on offer, she delivers a cheerful reply that became one of the film's most quoted lines. "Oh, we got both kinds," she says, brightly, "country *and* Western!" The joke was that those two kinds of music were really the same kind, and sometimes they have been. Starting in 1949, *Billboard* magazine has published a list of the nation's most popular "country and western" records, and the hybrid term partly reflected the popularity and influence of cowboy culture. In that "Blues Brothers" scene, the jukebox is playing a song written by Hank Williams, an Alabama native who loved Western culture enough to call his band the Drifting Cowboys.

By the time "The Blues Brothers" was released, "country and western" was already something of an anachronism. *Billboard* had shortened the chart's name to "country" in 1962, as Nashville was growing more central to the genre and its identity was growing more Southern—the cowboy endured, but mainly as a character and as a costume. Munsick is thirty, and when he was a boy he found this tradition annoying, and maybe even offensive. "I would see country-music acts wearing cowboy hats," he told me. "Like, dude, you have never been on a horse before. Why are you wearing a cowboy hat?" His father, Dave Munsick, was the manager of a big cattle ranch before buying his own spread—a smaller alfalfa ranch near Sheridan, Wyoming—and Munsick grew up as part of two different family businesses: in addition to being a rancher, Dave Munsick is a fiddler and the leader of the Munsick Boys, a group devoted to proudly old-fashioned story songs about cowboy life. Compared with his country-music peers, Munsick is the Wyoming guy, but compared with his brothers and his father, who still work as full-time ranchers and part-time singers, he is the Nashville guy: the one who left home to join the music industry and sing songs that could be—and may yet become—big hits. "The kind of music that my brothers and my dad were playing, and are playing, is too raw for Nashville," Munsick told me, but he sometimes takes the Munsick Boys with him on the road, as his opening act.

Munsick got to Nashville by enrolling at Belmont University, whose campus is there. He wrote songs while also getting work as a bass player. (At one point, he was performing with both a jovial hip-hop band, Tribal Hoose, and a country-rock group, Blackjack Billy.) In 2013, he recorded a sorrowful love song called "Horses Are Faster" and uploaded it to YouTube; as the song began to find an audience, people in Nashville took note. One of them was Caroline, an old acquaintance, who became his manager and, a few months later, his girlfriend, and then his wife. Munsick's début album, from 2021, was called "Coyote Cry," and during the past few years he has tried to lean in to Western identity without turning it into shtick. "He's an anomaly," Cody Johnson says, fondly, of Munsick. "Not a lot of people can get up there and yodel and wear a bolo."

Munsick is a warm and thoughtful presence, with a bright smile and a tendency to pause, from time to time, when he talks—evidence of a lifelong speech impediment that comes and goes, he says, but that vanishes when he sings. "That emotion of longing always yields the best music, whether it's longing for a girl, or for the old days, or for home," he told me one afternoon, in a rehearsal studio west of Nashville. "I think that it actually helps me write music about Wyoming, not living there anymore. Because I miss it." He was wearing a baseball cap advertising King Ropes, which is both a traditional Western tack store, serving northern Wyoming for more than seventy years, and a life-style brand, selling hats and other merchandise that might appeal to customers who are unlikely ever to be in the market for, say, forty-five feet of calf rope.

Western imagery is always cycling in and out of style. Since 2018, the television drama "Yellowstone," which is set in Montana, has been updating the image of TV cowboys. And earlier this year, in Paris, Pharrell Williams, the creative director of Louis Vuitton, showed a boots-and-denim collection meant to celebrate "the iconography of American Western dress." Munsick wants his listeners to understand that a cowboy need not be a caricature; he recently released a documentary, "Voice of the West," which profiles a handful of Native American cowboys, including his boyhood friend Stephen Yellowtail, a rancher from the Crow Nation who worked as a stunt double in "1883," a "Yellowstone" spinoff. Munsick calls Yellowtail an inspiration, and cast him as the lead actor in his first proper video, "Long Haul," in which Yellowtail plays the cowboy—and Munsick is merely the singer.

Like most aspiring country stars, Munsick is hoping to get his music onto country radio, while trying not to get distracted by this quest; he says he checks his chart positions and other metrics no more than once a week. There are other ways to succeed, of course. In the past couple of years, the country-influenced singer-songwriter Zach Bryan, from Oklahoma, has packed arenas with scarcely any help from country radio stations, which have generally declined to play his music. And, even without a radio hit, Munsick is drawing growing crowds on the road; he will spend much of this summer and fall as the opening act for Lainey Wilson, one of the biggest new stars in the genre. After the Opry concert, Munsick headed out to the parking lot, where he said goodbye to his band—they would reunite a week later, for a gig in Florida. When Cody Johnson went to Nashville, he already had a following in Texas, and if necessary he might have been able to return there and make a decent living on the regional touring circuit. But Munsick doesn't have a similar option. "Yeah," he said. "We can't really do that in Wyoming." ♦

ON TELEVISION

CHAOS THEORY

"3 Body Problem," on Netflix.

BY INKOO KANG

Early in "3 Body Problem," the new Netflix adaptation of Liu Cixin's acclaimed science-fiction trilogy, intelligent life from another corner of the universe decides that a spectacle is required to get humanity's attention. On a cloudless night, the stars brighten, then flicker on and off, as if a kid were playing with a light switch, transmitting a series of numbers. Two physicists—one high and thus mesmerized, the other terrified—watch the phenomenon from a Gothic courtyard in Oxford, England. The next day, the stoner, Saul Durand (Jovan Adepo), chalks the experience up to an elaborate hoax; the rest of the world also saw the stars twinkle in code, but the celestial blinks went undetected by Earth's most powerful telescopes. The otherworldly signal may have been a message just for Saul's companion, a nanomaterials researcher named Auggie Salazar (Eiza González) who's had a glowing countdown emblazoned across her field of vision for days. The digits in the sky match the ones she now sees every time she opens her eyes.

Even before the aliens enter the picture, the universe of "3 Body Problem" is an expansive one, jumping between chronologies, continents, and realities. The series—from the "Game of Thrones" showrunners, David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, who share creator credits here with Alexander Woo—first attempts to ground viewers with a more conventional mystery. A string of suicides among élite scientists from across the globe catches the attention of Clarence Shi (Benedict Wong), an investigator for a mysterious intelligence agency. One of those deaths, that of a physics professor named Vera, prompts a reunion of her protégés, a group of five thirty-somethings which includes Saul and Auggie. Many of the deceased were plagued by the same hallucinatory countdowns: a deadline by which to halt their research, or else. From there, the narrative unspools with delightful unpredictability—sometimes linearly, sometimes exponentially. Clarence surveils the Oxford Five, the most promising of whom, Jin Cheng (Jess Hong), receives from Vera's grieving mother (Rosalind Chao) a futuristic, Oculus Rift-style helmet that virtually transports her to another realm. In this alternate universe, which for Jin appears as a version of imperial China, the mercurial gravitational forces of a trio of suns render survival impossible. Solving the "three-body problem" that lends the show its title is the only way to progress in this game—but, as Jin (and by extension Clarence) discovers, there's more at stake than merely reaching the next level. The test was devised by the beings behind the starry display, an extraterrestrial species in search of a more habitable planet, as a means of making their plight known to human players—and of sniffing out the geniuses who might aid or impede their planned colonization of Earth.

The present-day story of the Oxford Five is juxtaposed with that of a young woman named Ye Wenjie (a phenomenal Zine Tseng), whom we see come of age during China's Cultural Revolution, and whose physicist father was killed as part of the C.C.P.'s anti-intellectual purge. Wenjie is a brilliant scientist in her own right, albeit one who's forced to tread carefully in a fraught political landscape. Her troubles are exacerbated by Mao's

The narrative of "3 Body Problem" unspools with delightful unpredictability.

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONARDO SANTAMARIA

brutal development projects, which she fears will do lasting damage to the environment—a concern shared by an American activist named Mike Evans (played as a young man by Ben Schnetzer and as an elderly one by Jonathan Pryce, that master of wild-eyed conviction). Their shared disillusionment has far-reaching implications, particularly after Wenjie decides that it might be time for someone else—maybe even anyone else—to take *Homo sapiens's* place at the top of the proverbial food chain.

"3 Body Problem" belongs to an all too rare breed: mainstream entertainment that leads its viewers down bracingly original speculative corridors. The scenario the show ultimately posits bears little resemblance to traditional sci-fi fare; the aliens are coming, but not for another four hundred years, putting humanity on notice for an encounter—and possibly a war—that's many lifetimes away. This time span is as much a curse as a blessing. Forget the science for a second; what kind of political will—totalitarian or otherwise—is required to keep centuries of preparation on track? How do we get the über-rich to contribute to a new space race in a way that also flatters their egos? And what resources does it take to accelerate scientific discovery to a breakneck pace?

These intellectual stimulants are balanced with the old-fashioned kind—namely, dramatic set pieces and alarmingly inventive forms of body horror. The doomed souls in Jin's game adapt to the heat of three suns by "dehydrating" their bodies, shrivelling into sheets that are as flat and rollable as sushi mats. In the real world, Auggie's nanofibres are deployed as weapons to surreal and devastating effect, slicing through flesh and bone as if they were soft-boiled eggs. But the series also has genuine heart. The Oxford gang is rounded out by Will Downing (Alex Sharp), a softie long smitten with Jin, and his best friend Jack Rooney (John Bradley), a pragmatist who made millions selling snacks, uninterested in scrapping with the set another character calls the "Nobel laureates and jealous fucks who think they should be." The specificity of these friendships—the lens through which we come to understand the human stakes of intergalactic contact—is one of the show's great strengths.

After eight seasons of "Game of Thrones," Benioff and Weiss have become savants of the two-person scene, lending relationships a lived-in quality through quiet intimacies and observational humor. The showrunners take considerable liberties with their source material, transposing most of the action from China to the U.K. and imbuing characters with new depth. The result, though still sprawling, isn't as unwieldy as the eighteen-million-year time line of Liu's novels. The ultra-sleek (and evidently expensive) production design gives us all the shine and awe we could want, but there's a perpetual reminder of mammalian grubbiness, too. Clarence, whose perennial bedhead rivals that of Boris Johnson, functions as a much needed Everyman among the improbably hot and accomplished ensemble. Burdened by the knowledge of his relative ordinariness and by a bratty adult son with a weakness for get-rich-quick schemes, Clarence tackles the search for answers with a weary, trying-his-best quality that makes him more akin to the seven billion of us who aren't world-saving brainiacs—yet no less worthy of salvation.

Like the White Walkers of "Game of Thrones"—a frostbitten zombie horde whose inexorable approach posed an existential threat to the show's human schemers, whether or not they believed it was coming—the aliens in "3 Body Problem" also offer an unexpectedly potent metaphor for the looming perils of climate change. Once the danger of the invaders' advance becomes clear, the U.N. Secretary-General (CCH Pounder) insists that "we owe it to our descendants to fight for them." Inevitably, dissidents and skeptics remain. Some respond with indifference to a cataclysm that's still light-years away. Others see messianic potential in the new life-forms, assuming that their greater technological capabilities must be accompanied by greater enlightenment. Social movements, mass panic, and religious fervor proliferate. But the show's fanciful premise allows us to consider patterns of behavior that might otherwise feel dangerously familiar in 2024 from a safe remove. The in-universe fixation with the arrivals from outer space is explained by someone who already knows that he won't live to see them: "It's much more fun to imagine a future 'War of the Worlds' than it is to muck around with our current problems." His reasoning might well apply to those watching, too. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Lars Kenseth, must be received by Sunday, March 24th. The finalists in the March 11th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 8th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

" "

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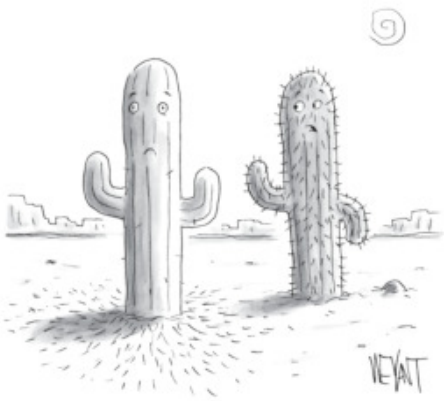
THE FINALISTS



"It doesn't make you any less of a cactus."
Matt Cowhey, Beesley's Point, N.J.

"There is still a spider on your back."
Kevin Walker, Bartlett, Tenn.

"Let me know what it feels like to be hugged."
Corinne Kason, Redwood City, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"It's not the sound of gentle waves kissing the shore, Walter. It's the dishwasher."
Kate Lohman, Providence, R.I.

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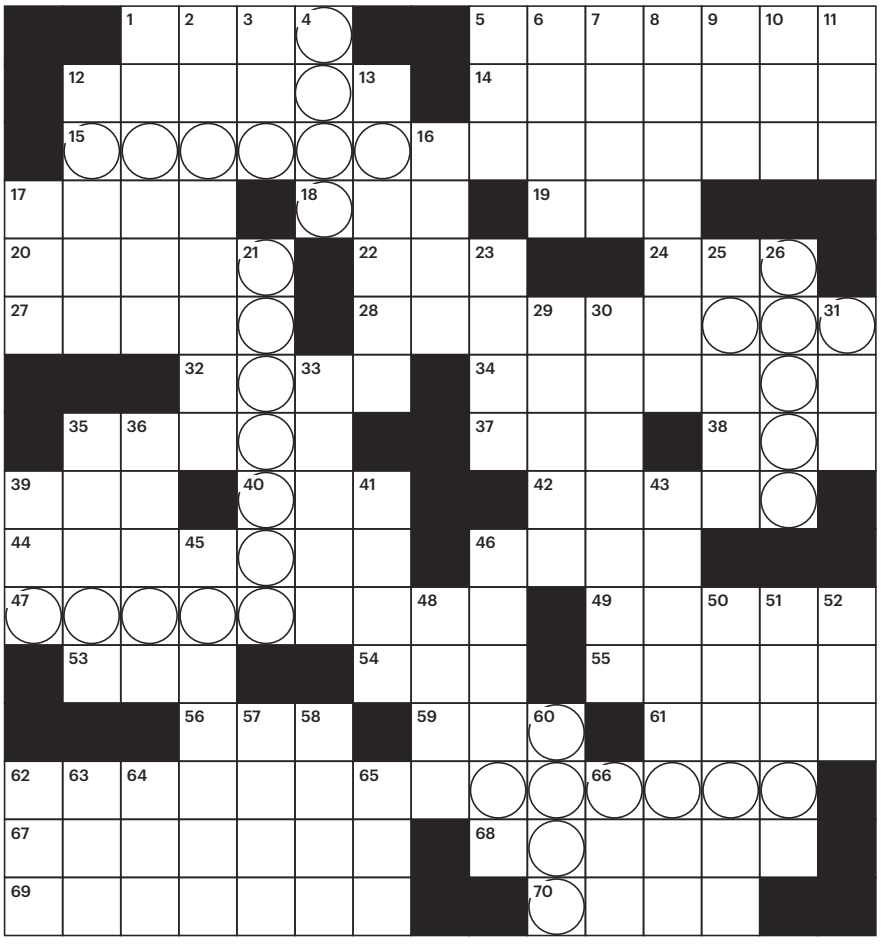
POKING HOLES

A themed crossword.

BY TRACY GRAY AND MATTHEW STOCK



ACROSS

1 E-mails discreetly
5 Outerwear that's rarely worn outdoors
12 Tries for a three-pointer, say
14 Location of Palau and Tonga
15 "Toy boat" and "Unique New York," for two
17 Short burst of wind
18 Nickname that omits "An"
19 Half of an umlaut
20 Wing it
22 Sigh of contentment
24 "You're joking!"
27 Scavenger in the Serengeti
28 Handle on the fly
32 Goad
34 Send out again
35 Fitness fad with a portmanteau name
37 The "E" of O.E.D.: Abbr.
38 In the past
39 The ___ Five (nickname for the stars of "Queer Eye")
40 Payment initials associated with SNAP
42 "All ___ in favor . . ."
44 Incontrovertible principle
46 Vegetable that provides a pop of color in a salad
47 Engage in excessive self-contemplation
49 Totally bewildered
53 Not gross, in a way
54 Bow, as a bookshelf
55 Parking permit, perhaps
56 Response to "Who's hungry?"
59 "That's neither here ___ there"
61 Laryngitic utterance
62 Layered drink made with Irish cream, sambuca, and grenadine
67 Brunch offerings served in flutes
68 Followed
69 The colors of the rainbow and the days of the week, e.g.
70 Alibi weaknesses

DOWN

1 Prolific Indian playback singer Asha
2 "Go on . . ."
3 Menial laborer, metaphorically
4 Talented athlete
5 Setting for simmering
6 ___-washed jeans
7 Kiss, in Caracas
8 Gifts that might be ignored in favor of the cardboard boxes they came in
9 What a raised finger may mean
10 It's inspired!
11 Profs' helpers
12 Clue room across the hall from the hall
13 Mexican garment
16 Shade similar to turquoise
17 "That's *so frustrating!*"
21 Piece of weight-lifting equipment
23 Fabled snoozer/loser
25 High-rise flats?
26 Measuring device
29 "Fiddler on the Roof" matchmaker
30 Inflated ego
31 ___ Speedwagon
33 Emergency-preparedness pack
35 S.N.L. alum Killam
36 Too good for
39 French film ender
41 "___ the Night Before Pride" (picture book by Joanna McClintick)
43 Youngster in the weasel family
45 Nasal-irrigation device
46 "Away, thou vile cur!"
48 Way out there
50 Climbs to the top of
51 Simplified
52 The Finsteraarhorn, for one
57 Semicircular section of a church
58 Part of a coconut
60 Sumo wrestler's milieu
62 Texting format, briefly
63 Bit of fiction
64 Mischievous sort
65 Blog-feed initials
66 Awareness-raising ad, for short

Solution to the previous puzzle:

A	F	T	E	R	C	A	R	E	■	J	A	M	B	A
J	E	A	L	O	U	S	E	X	■	F	L	Y	I	N
A	R	M	S	P	L	I	N	T	■	K	U	D	O	S
R	N	S	■	E	L	A	T	E	D	■	M	O	D	E
■	■	■	R	D	S	■	O	R	I	N	■	G	I	L
A	T	S	E	A	■	L	U	N	G	E	■	A	V	A
P	O	K	I	N	G	A	T	■	S	P	I	T	E	D
P	R	A	N	C	E	D	■	C	A	L	D	E	R	A
A	T	T	A	I	N	■	N	A	T	U	R	I	S	M
L	E	E	■	N	O	M	A	D	■	S	I	T	E	S
A	L	P	■	G	M	A	T	■	B	U	S	■	■	■
C	L	A	P	■	E	N	A	M	E	L	■	H	A	M
H	I	R	E	D	■	B	L	O	A	T	W	A	R	E
I	N	K	E	Y	■	A	I	R	T	R	A	V	E	L
A	I	S	L	E	■	G	E	T	S	A	H	E	A	D

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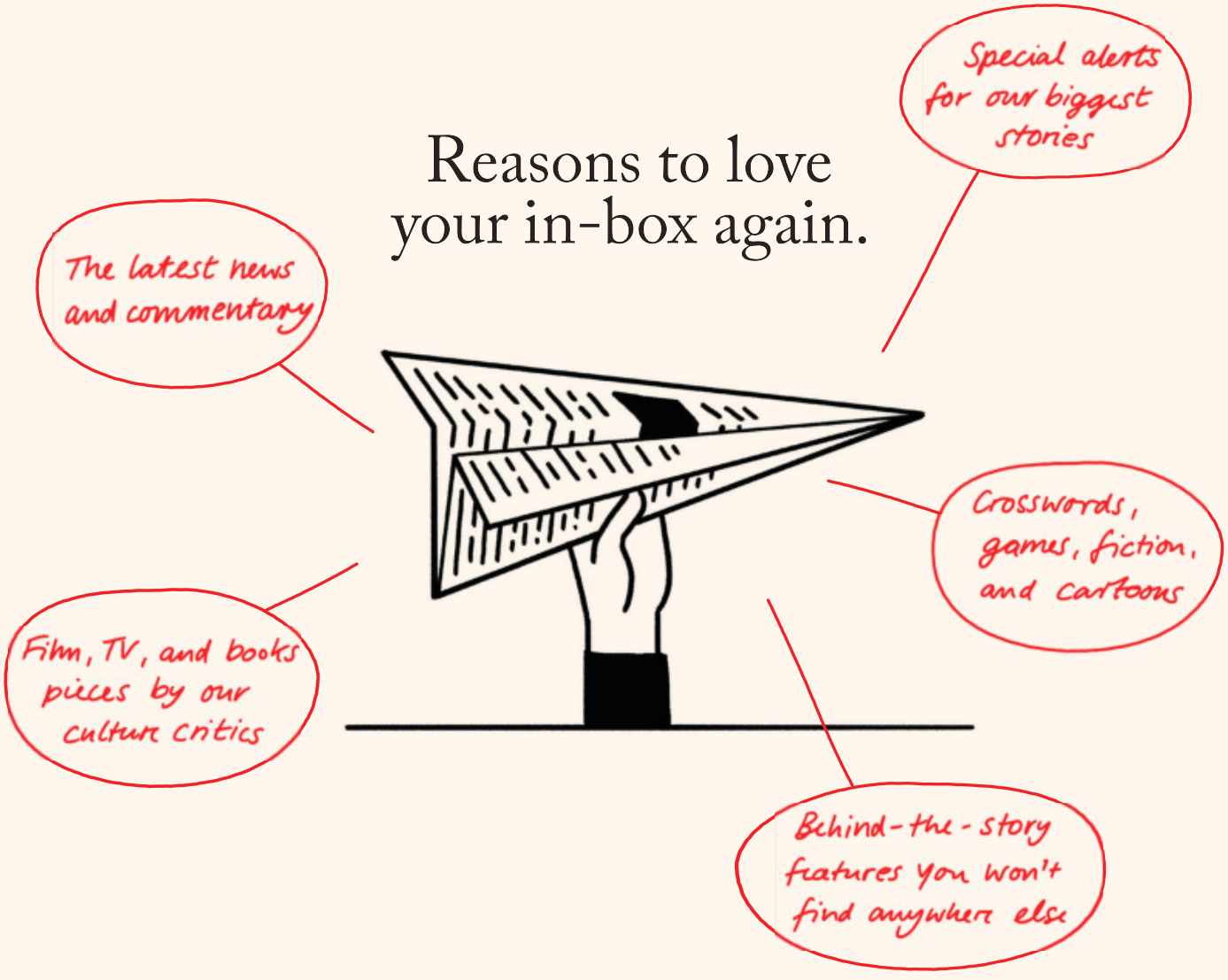
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